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Tales of Being and Knowing:  
Women's Stories of Identity, Subjectivity  
and Research.

Karen Deborah Parry.

*A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of  
the University of Northumbria at Newcastle for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.*

**September 2001.**



## Abstract.

This thesis explores the potential of creating more empowering subjectivities, by working to replace the authority of the researcher with that of the participants. The parallels between the power relations within the research process and the participants' experiences in relation to structures of social stratification are drawn, and the potential for exploring alternative subjectivities through the reconfiguring of research relations examined. Thus representation is a key issue and visual images and stories are explored as a means of negotiating and constructing authentic and acceptable narratives about the researcher's and participants' contributions. This is couched within the context of developing an anti-oppressive paradigm and interrogating what this means philosophically and practically within the research process. This then is a tale about researching identity and subjectivity, and the stories women constructed about participating in it. The central narrative charts the development of the study, while many other stories co-exist within the narrative, and compete for recognition. The narrative is a Postmodern one, and employs a discontinuous structure to engage the reader in an active process of reading. This mirrors the approach adopted in the study and offers the reader an experiential insight into the central methodological principles which emerged through the process. Thus as the researcher was de-centred in favour of the participants, so too within the thesis the author is de-centred in favour of the reader. The chosen presentation of the thesis is based on the premise that the meanings of the text are constructed in the process of reading, thus readers assume author-ity and bring their own narratives to bear when making meaning of the text. It is not your standard thesis, but a search for other ways of being and knowing.

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The challenge is to be  
yourself in a world that is  
trying to make you like  
everyone else.

(Renee Locks:2000)



## Introduction.

My study began as a project to explore personal identity as it related to gender and sexuality, and to consider the ways in which society in general, and communities in particular impacted upon the creation and maintenance of gender and sexual identities. I worked with a small group of women to look at these issues, and what emerged was a far more complex picture of 'identity', and very pertinent debates about the future of identity politics, the possibility of active agency and the relationship between power and knowledge. Thus the focus of the study changed, and became more about the process of knowledge construction and the barriers to self definition, participation and social inclusion. Experimenting with ways in which the participants could be involved more meaningfully within the study ran parallel with the examination of the participants' experiences of social participation. What the participants were expressing about the material conditions of their lives and their feelings about participation and inclusion, I tried to incorporate into the research methodology, in order to facilitate their active, meaningful participation within the study. This was part of an explicitly political agenda to explore the potential of an anti-oppressive research paradigm, whereby the participants would be involved in empowering research processes with the scope for transformation and change of interpersonal relationships and social structures. What emerged was an approach which worked to deconstruct the authority of the researcher and replace it with that of the participants. This was an exciting transformation, and one which led to the development of a more unusual style within which to present the thesis.

The methodological approach used developed with the study, and grew out of theories of reading and making meaning of texts, put forward by Roland Barthes (1977), and Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kappler (1993). Barthes argued that the writer of a text only came into existence during the process of writing, thus after the completion of the text they symbolically 'died'. Thus he challenged the notion that texts were hermetically sealed containing a fixed meaning created by the author. Thus meaning in a text, according to Barthes was constructed through the process of reading, where the reader would bring their knowledge and experiences to bear upon the text in the process of making meaning of it (1977). This was fundamental in this study, as it provided a

structure by which my authority as the researcher and author was deconstructed, which empowered the participants to define the meanings of the study.

This lead me into exploring ways of facilitating this shift in authority, and I experimented with visual images and short fictional stories as media for consulting the participants about their views. Sumara and Luce-Kappler (1993) introduced the concept of ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts, whereby a ‘writerly’ text is one which forces the reader to construct the meaning of the text as they read, by leaving spaces within the narrative for the reader to bring their own experiences to bear, and to influence the way in which the story has meaning for them. Writerly texts are deliberately ambiguous and allow for multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations to be made of them simultaneously. Thus in the study I attempted to create writerly texts to use in consultation with the participants, to negotiate the conclusions which were emerging from the data. I was interested to discover to what extent these texts facilitated the deconstruction of the authority of the researcher, and empowered the participants to articulate, value and promote their own responses.

Having explored these ideas within the study it seemed a natural progression to use them in the presentation of the thesis in terms of giving the reader an experiential insight into the approach, and embodying the values developed right through to the end of the study. The stage of reception of the research is a crucial aspect of the process, and the style of the thesis was felt to be important in terms of conveying the central ideas emerging from the study.

Thus the thesis is presented as a story, with multiple layers and internal stories.

It is a story of a study about participation. Participation in social life, and participation within a research project.

It contains stories of the participants and their data, stories about being a researcher and about the research process, there are stories of other people’s research and how it impacted upon this study, and there will be your stories which come into being as you read the thesis. Conclusions are not prescriptively drawn and imposed within the thesis, but opportunities for individual readers to draw their own conclusions are offered. The thesis also contains a number of images which were made by myself during the study in



response to the data, and it is accompanied by a separate volume of short stories which further elaborate on the issues raised within the thesis.

A similar approach has been utilised before by John Spindler (1999) in the presentation of his Ph.D. thesis as he explored the potential for stories to illuminate data and resonate with readers on a particular level, adding depth and texture to learning and understanding. Thus his thesis simultaneously made use of several voices to tell the multiplicity of his findings in a diversity of ways. While my thesis is structured quite differently, multiple voices have been interwoven to suggest to the reader the diversity of issues and responses within the study, and to highlight the different ways in which the study has been 'read' throughout the process by myself and the other participants. This thesis is therefore not designed to be a straightforward text where internal truths are revealed to the reader. It is part of a wider exploration of the construction of 'truth' and reality and a search for alternative ways of being and knowing which challenges the foundations upon which a Ph.D. has traditionally been based. The notion of the author is destabilised in a mirroring of the processes of deconstruction of other identities which occurred as part of the study. The 'self' is interrogated as a concept and the identities previously accepted as stable and enduring are rendered problematic. Thus it is a text which offers multiple possibilities for the reader in terms of examining their own perceptions of self and their identities, and exploring the implications of the interrelated extremes of deconstructing identities and building political activism upon them. It offers space to consider processes of learning and knowing, issues around author-ity, power and control, and to reconsider research approaches and what are generally accepted as suitable methods and tools to use. Fundamentally, the thesis also offers opportunities which I can't define, because I am unaware of what they are, but which will become apparent to you as you read, and begin to write your own stories within the spaces in mine.

The story is narrated by Sam, who will be your guide from now on.

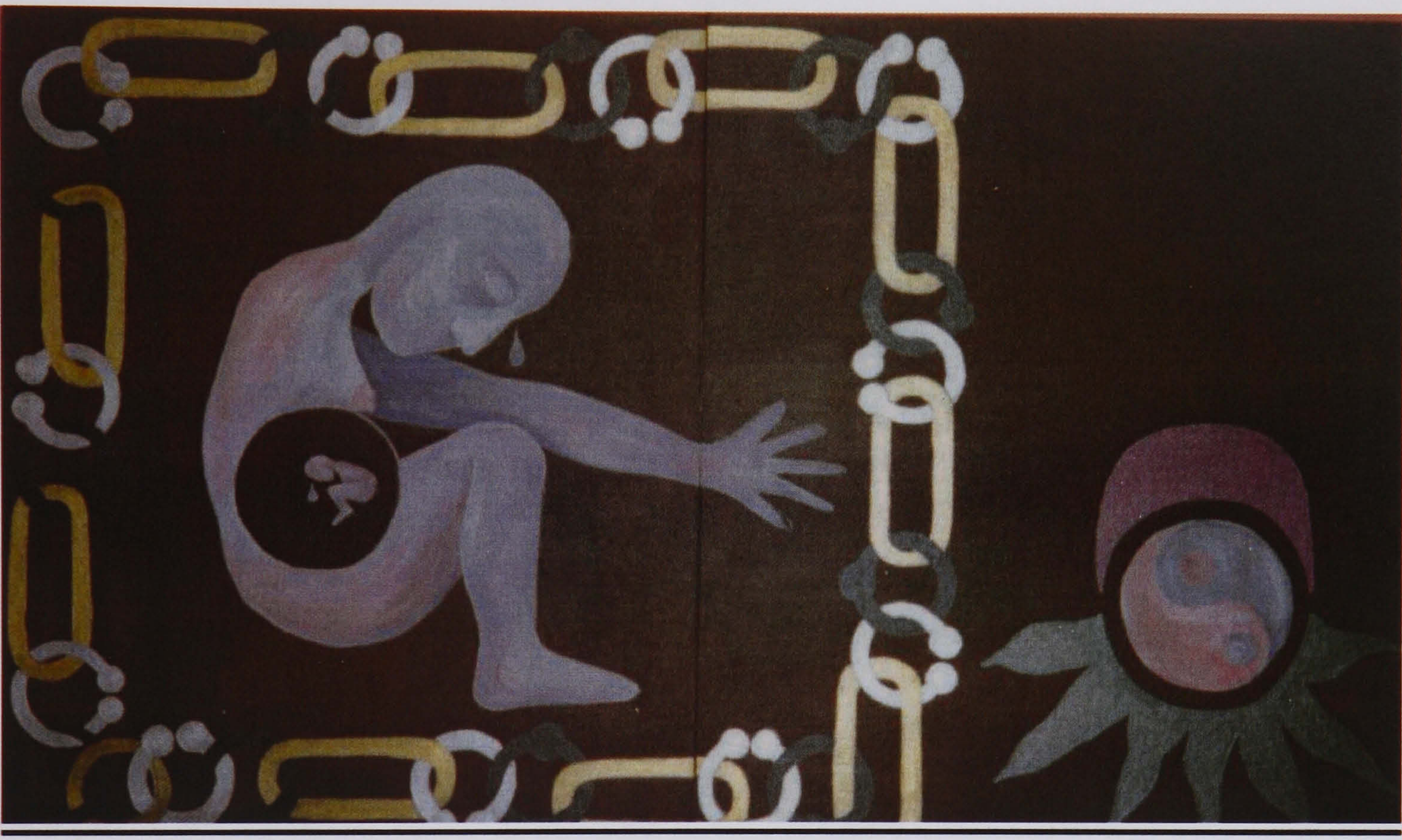


3/12/99

Dear Andy,

Sorry I have

## Part one: Beginnings.





3/12/99

Dear Andy,

Sorry I haven't written before now, but since getting this new job most of my time has been taken up. Also I didn't know if we were still talking after what I told you. I'm sorry if you were shocked, or if you didn't approve, but I thought we were friends. You used to say you loved me when you hugged me, and I thought that meant you'd accept me and be happy for me. When you ran away, and didn't call, and then went back to Australia I knew it was bad. We'd always said that if we were to go back we'd go back together. Anyway I miss you and I wonder what you're thinking so I decided to write. I'm doing a lot of writing these days. I even learnt to use a computer.

The writing I'm doing though is kind of strange. I'm helping Amber to finish her Ph.D. Amber Abela is my employer. I'm her P.A. (that's personal assistant if you don't know). She had a bad car crash which nearly killed her, I think about two years ago now. She lived, luckily for her, but now she needs help with some stuff. At the hospital they call her 'quadriplegic', but Amber hates it. She says it's too clinical. "Objectifying" she says. But when she's had a drink she says she's working on it, and she tells me the story of how it took her ages to come to terms with the word 'lesbian', and how she eventually grew to love and treasure it before giving it away again. Anyway, one of the things she needs help with is writing her Ph.D thesis. The occupational therapist says that when she's more better she may be able to get one of those computers with the head pointers to type with, but that's a while off yet.



So part of what I do for Amber is to type what she tells me. I'm not a good typer so it takes a long time. Amber says she's been working on it for that long that a slow typer won't make much difference. I can't imagine spending five years of my life doing one thing. I told her the longest I've ever been in one job is thirteen months. Do you remember when you used to meet me after work on a Friday and we'd blow half of my wages on tequilas at that leather club. We were wild then!

Anyway, before the crash, Amber had written all this stuff. She says she thinks it's okay; it just needs bits in between to make it all make sense. So these are the bits that I'm writing with her. Amber said she thinks it's okay that I'm in it... like, there, in your face. She said she doesn't agree with pretending that I was just a typist and that my involvement had no impact, so today I got to do my introduction. She said to write a small bit of my own to introduce myself, so I did. I wasn't sure what to write about me. I thought of you and how you could do a much better job for me. I said I was like 5'11", skinny, hair bleached off my head! I said stuff about liking clothes and fashion, trashy music, like boy bands and stuff. The kind of thing you can have a real good dance to, something with a rhythm you can shake your butt to. Do you think I missed anything?

I've been working for Amber since she got out of hospital eleven months ago, and since then I've passed my driving test (at last!) and have been driving the m.p.v. (multi-purpose vehicle) which she's got through the insurance and mobility. I live in, and get two days off a week. On one of these days Amber sees her parents. They're really nice.

My other day off is scheduled to coincide with one of her partner's rest days. He works shifts, with disabled children. On these days they spend half the day in bed together. When I come back she's really high. She loves those days. I think it's really sweet.

Amber and I get on really well. We have had in-depth conversations about stuff, like about her study and things. It's really interesting. I told her about you, and what I told you and how you freaked. I told her that my counsellor suggested I write to you. (I miss you.) She says she thinks there is nothing worse than leaving stuff unsaid, and feeling as though you've been misunderstood. I thought it was an okay idea. I really need for you to understand me, so if you hate me at least it will be for the right reasons.

7/1/00

I never thought you'd end up back in Queensland, but I guess things change. I'm really enjoying typing Amber's stuff for her. We get into some serious discussions and I'm learning so much about stuff. It really makes you think. I've got so much going on in my head about it that I really just want to share it all with you. We used to talk about everything. You were my best friend. Amber reckons that in her Ph.D, to really tell the story properly, you have to go right back to the beginning, to where she started from, and that this is a very different place to where she has ended up. I can really relate to that because when I left school and started as a kennel assistant at that vets in town there is no way I would ever have thought I would have ended up where I am now. It's weird.

Amber was probably reading all this stuff while I was helping to get the dogs ready for their castrations and stuff, and here we are together today working on this. Maybe that's what I didn't do with you. Did I just jump right in and tell you the ending when you didn't have a clue about the beginning of the story? I'm so sorry. You must have hated me. Can I please try and do it properly this time?

Anyway, this week we've been working on a chapter Amber wrote about all the stuff she was reading right back at the beginning, trying to get her head around what she wanted to do in the study and how she was going to go about it. She says it's really important because it shows how far her thinking has shifted, but that it also puts the study in context in terms of its roots and history. I never told you the history of where I was coming from. You thought you knew me and I must have made you feel like you didn't. I didn't know it would upset you so much when I told you I was straight. In some ways I thought you might know already. Anyway Amber's chapter really helped me to think about what being gay was like for me back then and why I went straight.



## Chapter One.

### A Critical Analysis of the Literature in the Fields of Self, Identity, and Sexuality.

Once the basic research proposal was written, I began to develop my literature search within the main field of the research, which at the beginning was sexuality, gender and identity development. The search led me to a range of reports proposing a variety of theoretical models of 'homosexual identity formation', which spanned a period of twenty years from 1972 to 1992. I was interested in contrasting models of identity with my own experience, and locating where my study fit in the field. While it was originally the content of these reports that I was most interested in, I became fascinated by the ways in which the studies, upon which the theories were based, were reported. This led me beyond a simple classification of the models put forward to a critique of the research paradigms used. This helped me to begin to clarify my own values regarding methodology. It is this double-edged analysis of the literature which developed.

Many of the papers critiqued utilised a range of terms in relation to identity without providing explicit definitions of them, and this created confusion in terms of what each writer was actually describing and how this related to what others had written. For instance, terms such as homosexual identity and gay identity were used interchangeably; lesbian identity was often subsumed within both of these terms, while orientation and identity were frequently conflated. For the sake of personal clarity, I will begin by **defining** the way I understood, and intended to use the terms. I will then examine the literature through two frames, the first being **Researcher Ideology** which is broken down into three sub-sections:

- 1) beliefs about (homo) sexuality
- 2) beliefs about gender in relation to sexuality
- 3) beliefs about identity

The second frame was **Methodology** which is broken down into two sub-sections:

- 1) researcher relationship to content and 'subjects'

2) purpose and audience of the research.

Finally I will consider the implications of my critique for the development of my own study.

### Defining terms.

Many of the papers read used a number of terms when categorising a behaviour or a person as homosexual, often without providing explicit definitions of them. This initially created confusion for me in terms of what each writer was actually describing and how this related to what others had written. This added to the difficulty of determining and comparing researcher ideology, as lack of precise definition left me unsure as to whether the writer was making a statement of conviction or merely handling the terminology uncritically. Before I began my study I felt it was important to develop a definitional framework of the terms I would employ to foreground any assumptions I may have and challenge them where appropriate. This was considered important because hidden assumptions have the potential to act as the frame through which everything in the study is considered and evaluated. My definitional framework was therefore presented as a provisional, contingent understanding, a starting point, which would change and develop as the research progressed. In the papers I read, the terms most often used when describing sexuality were: sexual orientation, homosexual identity, gay identity, and lesbian identity. I personally only felt comfortable with 'gay' and 'lesbian' as these seemed more empowering for the 'subjects' discussed as they were also used to self-define in an act of resistance to a cultural heterosexual imperative. However, I was also conscious that 'sexuality' for me referred to more than these terms alone or collectively described, and this was a lack which I struggled with when reading the literature. Furthermore, my developing perspective was that individuals may experience a diversity of 'sexualities', played out in a wider plurality of ways than the homosexual-heterosexual dyad accounted for.

My initial understanding of 'sexual orientation' however, was derived from Barbara Ponse (1978) who, using the term 'sexual object choice' defined it as being the component of sexual identity concerned with the sex of those to whom sexual feelings/



activity are directed towards or engaged with. A homosexual orientation is said to exist when a person desires or engages sexually with someone of the same sex. However, Michael Shively and John deCecco (1977) stated that sexual orientation consists of a physical *and* an affectional dimension, involving preference for male or female sexual and emotional partners. This perspective was useful in moving the focus away from a definition based purely upon sexual activity. In our culture, when one's actual or desired sexual partner is of the same gender as oneself, the person and their attendant behaviour are described as homosexual. However, this cannot be equated with a homosexual identity, and this was the distinction I made between orientation and identity. Homosexual behaviour can occur without either partner labelling it as such. Even when behaviour is labelled as homosexual, acceptance of a homosexual identity is not guaranteed (Cass:1979). Homosexual identity involves identifying oneself based on the contemporary, culturally specific meanings given to that term. In terms of the reading done, I concluded that homosexual identity was often aligned very closely with sexual orientation, as it was believed that sexual/ emotional object choice was the most influential factor in an individual's choice to accept a homosexual identity.

The term 'gay identity' developed within the gay and lesbian liberation movements, as an attempt to reclaim homosexual identity from medical and psychiatric discourses, which aligned it exclusively with sexual behaviour. Gay identity then, refers holistically to the whole experience of having a homosexual sexual orientation, which involves social, political and cultural dimensions. These are recognised as playing an equally important role in formulating and defining gay identity as the sexual does. Finally, 'lesbian identity' refers specifically to women's experience of same sex desire asserting its qualitative difference from that of men. Therefore, it was from this understanding that I started the study.

### Researcher ideology.

The literature was then considered in terms of the first set of frames of analysis, which covered the area of researcher ideology. This frame comprises analysis of the researchers' values and beliefs in relation to their 'subjects' and the area of study. It

foregrounds and challenges assumptions and draws distinctions between the main theoretical perspectives in the field. The three sub-headings under which the writing is organised are Beliefs about (homo) sexuality; Beliefs about gender in relation to sexuality; and Beliefs about identity.

### **Beliefs about (homo) sexuality.**

The first frame through which the literature was considered was that of Beliefs about (homo) sexuality. The debates which emerged were:

1. biological essentialism versus social constructionism to explain sexuality, and
2. the bipolar or multidimensional character of sexual orientation.

Threading through many of the papers was also the assumption that some sexualities were 'normal' whereas others were not. All of these issues were interconnected, and often lay at the heart of the multi-layered assumptions which implicitly underpinned many of the papers in this field at the time.

To begin with the debate between the positions of biological essentialism and social constructionism. At its most basic level this debate concerns whether (homo) sexuality is innate, and thus the expression of a natural essence within an individual, or whether it is socially constructed, thus independent of biological influences. John deCecco and John Elia wrote,

“Biological essentialism depicts a process in which biological influences precede cultural influences and set predetermined limits to the effects of culture. In effect, it submerges sexual preference, a human process, into sexual orientation, a biological mechanism. Social constructionism tends to depict the individual as an empty organism that is filled and shaped by culture and society and is devoid of consciousness and intention.” (1993:1)

The historical basis of this debate can be found in the late 18th Century when homosexuality came to be viewed in terms of an individual's intrinsic sexuality rather than in terms of a collection of sexual acts. This then created the concept of homosexuality as a state of being; the biological essentialist position. Thus from a political point of view, these 'beings' could now be identified, labelled, quantified and



controlled. However, as evidence which contradicted this position emerged, such as Kinsey's rejection of categories which positioned people as inherently heterosexual or homosexual, the theory metamorphosed to explain these contradictions within it (Richardson;1984). Thus individual responsibility was emphasised over socialisation.

The distinction between the bipolar and multidimensional concepts of sexuality according to Michael Shively and John deCecco (1977) is that, under a bipolar view, heterosexuality and homosexuality lie at opposite ends of one spectrum, and therefore one is dominant within an individual at the expense of another. This is similar to Alfred Kinsey's dimension. However, Kinsey always rejected that people's sexuality was so decisively polarised (Richardson:1984). A multidimensional view on the other hand holds that the dimensions of heterosexuality and homosexuality are distinct, thus individuals can simultaneously relate to either sex in a desiring or sexual way. Examples of theorists who hold a bipolar view are John Lee (1977) and Vivienne Cass (1979), as Lee discusses sexual orientation being 'resolved' in the process of announcing one's homosexuality, thus implying an 'arrival' at one end of the bipolar dimension, while Cass outlines, "...the process by which a person first comes to consider and later to **acquire** the identity of "homosexual" as a relevant aspect of self." (1979:219, my emphasis).

However, within this body of literature Joan Sophie (1986) began to challenge this position, as she presented data which suggested that identities were not permanent, but were open to change, that this could be quite radical change, for instance going from an exclusively heterosexual to an exclusively homosexual position, and that these changes could occur many times over a life span. This disrupted notions of fixed sexual identity which was quantifiable and manageable, and suggested instead a much more fluid and contingent model of sexuality which was infinitely more difficult to pin down, study, control and analyse. She also provided evidence of social factors, such as peer pressure, or widely held negative concepts of homosexuality, being the cause of such changes. She argued that data showing identity permanence was evidence of **reluctance** to change, as opposed to **inability** to change.



Finally, in terms of researchers' ideological beliefs about sexuality, was the value judgment threading through many papers, that heterosexuality was 'normal' while homosexuality was not. These beliefs came through implicitly in the researchers' work, and indicated where their understanding and prejudice lay (Shively and deCecco:1977; Cass:1979; Coleman:1982; Lewis:1984; Berg-Cross:1988). Inasmuch, all failed to give sufficient recognition to the extent to which culturally enforced negative definitions of homosexuality could be the cause of negative self-concepts. Thus all continued to assert that it was the homosexuality rather than the homophobic society which caused negative feelings. Other writers pathologised homosexuality, as Linda Berg-Cross discussed, "...the unique problems that face college age lesbians..." (1988:97), yet went on to describe problems which may face *any* women that age. Both Linda Berg-Cross (1988) and Eli Coleman (1982) discussed increased risks of sexually transmitted diseases, the morbid intensity of homosexual relationships and the widespread problem of drug misuse to, "...anaesthetise pain or to shore up a weak self-concept." (Coleman: 1982:37). Their perspective denied the possibility of homosexuality being positive, resistant or self-affirming. Similarly, homosexuality was extracted from its political context, and presented as coming exclusively from within the individual, as it was asserted that neither hegemonous gender relations and roles, nor dissatisfying experiences between the sexes were causes of homosexual object choice.

### **Beliefs about gender in relation to sexuality.**

In some papers which discussed 'homosexual' identity development, no distinction was made between male and female homosexuality (Shively and deCecco:1977; Lee:1977). Other papers specified that their research group was lesbians (Groves and Ventura:1983; Lewis:1984; Sophie:1986; Berg-Cross:1988). Yet others used the term homosexual and made the occasional reference to differences between the genders in terms of identity development experiences (Cass:1979; Coleman:1982; Troiden:1989). In every case these differences were explained by 'sex role socialisation'; the process by which girls learn how to be female by socially prescribed rules and expectations, and boys learn to be male. However, by asserting that differences between lesbians and gay

men derive solely from sex role socialization, the reality that lesbianism is, for some women, as much a statement of resistance to the oppressive social relations of patriarchy they live under, is denied. Adrienne Rich's (1980) alternative model of labelling experience as lesbian and building an identity out of it challenged those theorists who saw homosexuality as a predominantly or exclusively sexual identity. It also suggested that gender differences in identity development and experience needed to be viewed as far more complex than the 'sex role socialisation' theory suggested.

Secondly, the way in which the quality of lesbian relationships was characterised in the literature, served to maintain a belief in the myth of women's passive approach to sex. This was evident in the work of Groves and Ventura, who asserted that 'typical' lesbian sex occurs within stable loving relationships. This view currently remains evident in many portrayals of lesbianism in popular culture, especially through the media of television and film (e.g. Binny and Della in Eastenders), whereby lesbian sex is portrayed as gentle, sensitive and romantic, rather than intense, passionate and erotic. This limits and defines women's sexuality, and reproduces stereotypical gender roles within the context of a lesbian relationship.

### **Beliefs about identity.**

The third sub-section of the Researcher Ideology frame focuses on beliefs about identity, and this centres around the way in which the writer characterises identity, in terms of its **origins** and its **development**. Identity development is further broken down into two strands; the **nature** and the **outcome** of development.

In terms of the **origins** of identity, the debate was located in whether identity and behaviour are inextricably linked, i.e. if a person engages in homosexual behaviour, a homosexual identity naturally exists, or whether identity is a **choice**, and depends upon the individual labelling themselves as homosexual irrespective of their behaviour. Writers such as Groves and Ventura (1983) who made no distinction between sexual orientation and identity, and Shively and deCecco (1977), who viewed orientation as an aspect of sexual identity would be examples of supporters of the former argument. Lee



(1977) on the other hand, would fall into the latter category as he distinguished between orientation, which involves sexual object choice, and identity which involves explicitly labelling that orientation. From the definitions I provided at the beginning of the chapter it will be clear that I fundamentally disagree with the former position, as it denies the possibility of individuals engaging in homosexual behaviour without labelling it as such, or recognising their behaviour as homosexual without labelling themselves.

The importance of self labelling and identifying was put forward by several writers, (Lee:1977; Cass:1979; Coleman:1982; Troiden:1989). Lee recognised the social and political implications, stating

“In short, the taking of a label can be a sociopolitical act of policy - an act within a social context that will have implications for status, power, and conflict.” (1977:54)

However, for some writers like Eli Coleman (1982), the failure to self label was negatively viewed as a denial of an existing identity. The issue of others labelling one's behaviour and consequently projecting an identity onto an individual, which may or may not be congruent with their own interpretation is pertinent, whether one believes accepting an identity is a natural aspect of sexual orientation, or an explicitly political act. Refusing to accept a label may be frowned upon by those subscribing to either argument, either as a denial of a natural imperative, or as a refusal to identify with a political movement of resistance.

In terms of **development** of identity, debate covered the **nature** of the development, and the **outcome** of development. Within the nature of identity development, was the notion of it being unidirectional or multidirectional. Unidirectional theorists, such as Lee (1977), Cass (1979), and Coleman (1982), asserted that once an individual was in the process of homosexual identity development, that process would continue in a linear progression towards identity integration. The only exception to this would be when identity foreclosure occurred, in which case an individual would remain at that point in the process where development ceased. Multidirectional theorists, however, argued that identity development was non-linear, and that it could change

direction many times in a person's life. Sophie (1986) was one of the few proponents of this theory in the literature read, and in response to unidirectional models of lesbian identity development, she wrote,

“...other options were also possible in which the individual re-incorporated attractions to men which had become unacceptable while developing a lesbian identity. The notion of a fixed identity, then, had to be dropped in favour of recognition of flexibility in sexual identity.” (1986:50).

Accepting that sexual orientation and identity can be conceptualised as fluid processes fundamentally undermines large quantities of traditionally received ‘knowledge’ and structures of social stratification based on it.

Existing alongside this debate is the notion of identity as a stable end product of the process of development. The unidirectional theorists tended to argue one of two things. Firstly, that once a stable homosexual identity has been integrated, the process of identity development is completed, with the integrated identity as an end product. Alternatively, it is argued that identity development is a continuous process which will carry on throughout life, but it was implied that this continuous development would be unidirectional, as part of the linear progression already begun. Joan Sophie (1986) on the other hand, argued that there was no end product, that identity development continued throughout life and that this was not necessarily linear, although for some it may be. Finally, unidirectional theorists also outlined what characterised a successfully integrated identity. Such characteristics included commitment to the homosexual identity, expressed through self acceptance; the fusion of sexuality and emotionality within a same-sex orientation; increased happiness; and a same-sex love relationship. This also included disclosing one's homosexual identity to everyone else in one's interpersonal environment. Such theories presented individuals who did not reach, or choose to reach these ends as failures (Berg-Cross:1988).



## Methodology.

Within the frame of Methodology, I have identified the sub-sections of Researcher relationship to content and subjects, and Purpose and audience of the research to organise my arguments. These are important in terms of considering the ways in which the research is set up, conducted and presented, and the comparative roles, profile and ownership of researcher, participants and audience

### **Researcher relationship to content and subjects.**

Firstly then considering the researcher's relationship to the content of the study, from the identity development models I read, only John Lee (1977) identified himself as homosexual and used himself as one of his subjects, drawing on his own experiences to criticise existing theory. Other theorists remained more traditionally 'outside' the group they were researching by not disclosing their sexuality and maintaining a certain distance between themselves and their research 'subjects'. They were therefore also personally removed from the content of the research, which is a stance required within Positivistic methodology. This was reflected in some of the writing as Vivienne Cass reported the importance of "empirical precision" (1983:110), while Eli Coleman (1982) took a predominantly quantitative approach to data collection and handling. These strategies reinforced notions of the importance of metanarratives over individual realities and generalisable theories over individual differences. This was again closely aligned with the Positivist approach, which emphasises a detached relationship between 'research subject' and 'research object'; validity criteria concerned with repeatability; and the researcher's commitment to be value free and objective. This paradigm could also be seen as compatible with the outcomes of much of the research presented in the literature, as the 'homosexuals' studied were largely presented as a group empirically distinct from heterosexuals, as well as from those researching them.

In much of the literature, the individuals who participated in the research were referred to as 'subjects', thus 'subjected to' rather than 'participating in' the research. In terms of the researchers' relationship to their research subjects, what characterised many

of the studies was the researcher being cast in the role of the expert, regardless of whether or not they identified as a member of the group being studied. In fact, identifying as a member of the group would potentially have detracted from the researcher's status as expert, as within Positivist methodology, researcher impartiality is valued. Thus the assumption of the superior knowledge of the researcher about the detail of the 'subjects' lives was apparent.

### **Purpose of and audience for the research.**

Finally in terms of methodology, is the purpose and audience of the research. None of the papers read appeared to have the subjects, or the group from which the subjects were drawn in mind as their potential audience. This was evidenced in the vocabulary used to discuss the subjects, which ranged from being clinical, to patronising, to offensive. This was illustrated by Coleman (1982) when making reference to the perceived immaturity of homosexuals when first entering into relationships, or by highlighting the need to give 'these people' additional information about sexually transmitted diseases. The intended audiences do however include sociologists, psychologists, and therapists. Regarding the purposes of the research, several research reports (Cass:1979; Coleman:1982; Groves and Ventura:1983; Lewis:1984; Berg-Cross:1988), concluded by making recommendations for therapy for the client group studied. While the emphasis here was not on a cure, it was either put forward as a means of making a sad existence more bearable (Berg-Cross:1988), or to enable therapists to help clients who were assumed to be unable to help themselves. This presumed that the therapist was better qualified than the subjects to diagnose the causes of problems and to suggest a suitable course of action (Cass:1979; Coleman:1982; Groves and Ventura:1983; Lewis:1984).

An overriding theme to these approaches was the desire to label, quantify, dissect, and categorise people. Diane Richardson (1984) was critical of medical, psychiatric and legal discourses on homosexuality, asserting that an inside/ outside situation was created and maintained to enable homosexuals to be identified and held as separate from heterosexuals. This agenda still seemed to be in place, and seemed to be the basis of the



majority of the arguments I have critiqued here. While herself putting forward a model which sustained this practice, Vivienne Cass highlighted the historically contingent nature of the homosexual identity, as serving the interests of particular groups. She wrote,

“...homosexual identity can only arise in those societies where the homosexual categorisation is acknowledged. In this sense, homosexual identity is hypothetical, constructed out of a need to control and restrict (Plummer, 1981) rather than a reflection of any actual concrete form.” (1983:121)

Therefore part of the outcome of these researchers’ work was perhaps to sustain the belief in the polarisation of heterosexual and homosexual, in terms of sexual category, actual individuals, and range of experiences.

## **Conclusion.**

Here then, the literature has been considered through the frames of Researcher Ideology and Methodology. In terms of developing a study with lesbian women, a socially marginalized and oppressed group of people, the literature clearly illustrated for me the issues around identity and sexuality which I wanted to take forward. These were:

- the notion of identity fluidity which challenges reductive categories of sexuality
- the intersection of gender with sexuality
- the political component of sexuality, and the imperative of the State to control and define sexuality.

From this point then I identified the next stage of the study to be to continue a literature search, this time more focused on what lesbians said about their own sexuality.

Having considered issues of methodology arising from the literature read, the main issues identified for my own study were:

- the need to examine my own assumptions, to develop an open mind whereby *all* questions can be asked and all realities can be conceptualised and seen.
- the importance of not casting myself (as researcher) as the expert on other people's lives, and not taking on an objectifying gaze.
- the need to be non-judgmental.
- the importance of allowing the participants and data to challenge my thinking and change my understanding.
- when developing models of theory, ensure they are adequate. If reality is too complex to be represented this way be explicit about this.
- include research participants as the intended audience of the research
- report back in empowering ways, which means having integrity *and* sensitivity
- view individuals as participants and not as subjects, and consider collaboration as a technique of engagement
- make any political agenda within the research explicit

These lead me on to consider some particular issues within methodology, such as approach, ownership and representation. Much of the literature read was derived from studies couched within the Positivist paradigm which I argued, lead to the 'subjects' being objectified and becoming subjected to the 'expertise' of the 'professionals'.

As an alternative model, I explored Women's Studies as a means of integrating some of the emergent principles above into practice. Women's Studies made great progress challenging the fundamental principles upon which much academic research had previously been based, exposing the position which constructed the Positivist approach as universally relevant and singularly valid, as androcentric (Bowles and Duelli Klein:1983). Inquiry about any 'other' reality could not be formulated and studied, due to the investigative apparatus being unable to conceptualise the questions which would facilitate enquiry. It was therefore necessary for alternative research procedures to be created, and this occurred alongside Black and Feminist civil rights movements which, through active protest began to challenge oppressive social relations. Alongside the



Feminist Movement, Women's Studies developed to create theoretical positions to support and inform direct action and protest. Humphries, Mertens and Truman state,

“Feminist research has challenged some fundamental binaries of traditional approaches, such as objectivity and ‘distance’ from the participants, hierarchies amongst knowers, both within research teams and between research and researcher, and universality and uniqueness. It also exposes androcentrism in research language which excludes women, which separates researchers from the people they are investigating and which facilitates elite male control.” (2000:8)

A central aim has been to conceptualise women's oppression and consider the most appropriate ways of challenging it.

The principles which underpinned Women's Studies included recognising women's experiences as qualitatively different to men's and therefore valid as a distinct research area, and for researchers to consciously use their own experiences of oppression within the research, in a process of conscious partiality with participants. Another principle was to use the research for political ends, making the purpose of the research the creation of strategies for resistance and change, thus generating theory *for* women as opposed to research *on* women (Duelli Klein:1983). There was a conscious decision to keep the research in context, to study the variables previous research had sought to control, and to renegotiate the relationship between researcher and participants, to validate the researcher's identification with them, and to recognise and label values, rather than denying them. This was a dramatic challenge to traditionally accepted forms of knowledge production, and is the approach I started the study with. Therefore the first level of literature review enabled me to begin to interrogate ‘identity’ as a concept, while also prompting me to consider the research design more carefully.

23/1/00

Amber laughs a lot when she reads her old stuff back. When I ask her why she says it's because in it she sounds so full of fire and passion about the issues, and yet it was no time at all before she was moving and

changing again, and then all she had argued for seemed irrelevant. "No, irrelevant isn't right" she'll say. "It was still relevant, it was just a bit wide of the mark" and she carries on reading and laughing. I'm stunned because when I read it, it sounds fab. Like how those politicians on Question Time go on. (Do you remember we used to watch it and shout at the telly!) She knows how to say things to make them sound persuasive. I ask her what she means about growing to love the label 'lesbian' and she explains some stuff about herself. I told her that people reading her thesis might understand it better if they know what she's just told me, and she asked me what I thought they needed to know. Basically I thought she should tell them that she was identifying as lesbian when she wrote the chapter, and that she hadn't been for long, and that she really wanted to know who she was, and to just feel better about herself than she did. I know what she means. We were best mates and we both thought we were gay. Well... you might say you knew you were, but I **never** felt really happy. I always wondered if there was something else about me. It was like a nagging feeling always there. It was only about six of those margueritas that could get rid of it for a bit. Maybe I should have told you that at the time.

Anyway I don't think the stuff Amber read would have helped her much. It seemed really negative. But I suppose in a way even having something to disagree with was better than nothing. Anyway, Amber asked if I thought it was okay to leave the rest of what she told me about herself out until later on in the book (thesis). She had this wicked smile which reminded me of that Paula we hung around with when we were



kids, when she was about to pinch some cigarettes from her dad to take to our den. It seemed funny that Amber would want to have secrets when she more or less told the ending already in the introduction, but I then I've begun to realise that people won't necessarily understand the ending until they've heard the middle bit. I also realise that when I told you I was straight I was only telling you part of my story. When you freaked I didn't dare tell you any more.

13/2/00

I'm saving up to go travelling just like we always said we would once we'd made some money working in England. I still want to visit Thailand. I thought of you when I saw The Beach. You used to be well into Leonardo!

14/2/00

I finally got the information through from the Australian adoption agency today. It had been passed from one department to another before being sent to the local Social Services here, and a counsellor contacted me about it. He asked if I wanted some support while going through all the documents about my real parents but I said no. The envelope is here, bulging with god knows what because I haven't opened it yet. I wonder what they can have sent me. I fantasise that it is fifteen birthday cards they tried to get to me, but which didn't reach me due to me being passed between so many care and foster placements. But I doubt it. I try not to build my hopes up that it will answer all my questions and tell me who I am. I doubt one small envelope could do that anyway. The questions are too big to fit inside, never mind the answers.

While my own story moves on slowly, Amber's thesis is gathering pace all the time. Amber says the next thing that needs to go in her thesis is how her understanding of sexuality and identity moved on and changed as she read a whole different body of stuff. She said she realised that the majority of the stuff she had read up to then had been quite old, but because she was quite new to this, it was the best she could do in terms of finding relevant literature. She told me how she was desperate to know what more recent theorists were saying, and that she was craving for something radical and passionate. Something which came somewhere near to how she was feeling. She gets quite animated as she tells me this and a nerve in her left cheek twitches. This knocks the stuffing out of me cos I wonder if this is the only way her body can express her enthusiasm now only her face works.

Anyway, I get excited with her wondering if what she found will help me too. She says she found two things which did it for her in different ways. One was Lesbian Feminism and the other was Queer Theory. Apparently they're quite opposed, but Amber reckons that both inspired her and set her free. She said that reading the Lesbian Feminist stuff made her feel strong and powerful, but then Queer let her be anything she wanted. Then she told me how trapped she had felt, like she was suffocating, and how the possibilities of Queer in a way had saved her from dying inside the plastic bag that was pulled tight over her head. I was mind blown by this. I didn't realise anyone else could feel so crap without something really bad having happened to them.

She wrote a whole chapter about it and I helped her edit it.



## Chapter Two.

### An exploration of my assumptions.

This chapter was the outcome of a sustained period of reading, prompted by the conclusions I drew from the first stage of the literature search. Its completion coincided with putting together a short piece of publicity to raise awareness of my research within local lesbian communities, to enlist a group of research participants. I was conscious of the desire to make the invitation to participate as inclusive as possible, as an area of interest within my study was the often exclusive nature of the community itself. This led me to consider some of the competing definitions of the category 'lesbian', and to start to unpack Tamsin Wilton's (1995) conceptualisation of Lesbian as a discursive site. I began by reading a critique by Marion Smiley (1993) of the Marxist Feminist and Radical Feminist positions, in which she first makes explicit, and then criticises the assumptions within each position, and the implications of these for the political strategies based upon them. Smiley states,

“...since our particular understanding of commonality, along with our initial characterisation of individuals, is part of a larger theoretical framework that itself has its source in the practical concerns of those who originally developed it, our theoretical framework inevitably determines in part the consequences that our generalisations will have on individuals in practice. But we do not generally ask about the practical concerns that lie behind our theoretical frameworks or what sort of identities they might lead us to impose on individuals. Nor do we take into consideration the possibility that in generalising about individuals within these frameworks we impose identities on individuals that run counter to our own practical concerns.” (1993:95).

I thus began to consider my own assumptions and how these too might have a significant effect on the ways in which the resultant research was structured. While I discovered I had made many assumptions about who 'lesbians' were and about gender and sexuality, the most fundamental and enduring of these were the 'common sense' assumptions that there are only two genders, and that all lesbians are women. Freeing myself to challenge these assumptions was liberating in terms of opening myself up to a myriad of

possibilities regarding sexuality and gender. I thus began to look at the literature in the field to find perspectives which expanded upon these issues. I found the main debates to be between Lesbian Feminist theorists and Queer theorists.

The first section of this chapter then examines **Lesbian Feminism** in terms of its relationship to Feminism and pre-Women's Movement lesbian communities. I then go on to explore the relationship of Lesbian Feminist theory to sex and sexuality, and develop this into an analysis of potential political alliances. This section is concluded by a consideration of the implications of Modern and Postmodern conceptions of reality for Lesbian Feminist thinking. The second section analyses **Queer theory** in terms of its development from Postmodern and Poststructural theory, and its potential as a philosophical and political challenge to dominant conceptions of sex and sexuality. I then go on to outline the main components of Queer theory, including Parody and Camp as tools of resistance, and suggest some of the implications of these for gender and lesbian politics. I conclude with a section dedicated to the **re-focusing of my study**, whereby I process the conclusions drawn in terms of implications for research content, practice, and engaging with participants.

### Lesbian Feminism.

Lesbian Feminist theory dominated much of my early reading around lesbian identity and politics. The main debate seemed to be about 'Feminism' and existed between the main body of feminists and the splinter group of Lesbian Feminists. From my encounter with Lesbian Feminist theory, I found it to be quite prescriptive in terms of sexuality, viewing lesbianism as an extension of the political activism directed towards ending women's oppression, and as such was full of 'oughts' and 'shoulds' for its activists. The following is an analysis of Lesbian Feminist theory and politics, and is organised under the following sub-headings:

- **The historical debate between feminists, lesbians and lesbian feminists.**
- **The debate about sex.**
- **Relationships with men.**



- **The challenge of a Postmodern construction of reality.**

Through these I have examined how Lesbian Feminist theory competes to define 'lesbian', as a specifically political act within its agenda.

### **The historical debate between feminists, lesbians and lesbian feminists.**

Lesbian Feminist theory and political strategy developed out of mainstream Feminists' reluctance to embrace lesbianism as a key political strategy during second wave Feminism. Internal homophobia was exploited by external forces to create divisions within the movement, and lesbian Feminists splintered off to form a new wing of Feminism. The group which formed to speak from a specifically lesbian position within the Women's Movement quickly had a significant impact upon the lesbian communities existent prior to second wave feminism. 'Political lesbians' emerged as a dominant force within these communities, arguing that lesbianism was the only way to end male supremacy and oppression, and therefore was a choice all committed Feminists should make. Correspondingly, Feminism was a commitment all lesbians were expected to embrace. This ideology firstly denied the experiences of pre-feminist lesbians who believed lesbians were 'born not made', and subsequently outlawed their cultural and sexual practices as 'male identified'. However in mainstream society it had the effect of challenging the assumption in dominant discourses that homosexuality was either an essential, biologically determined aspect of an individual's persona which may one day be controlled through genetic engineering, or a mental disorder stemming from personal experiences which should be treated through psychiatry (Jay:1995; Wilton:1995; Healy:1996).

The mutability of sex within the lesbian identity was first articulated by Adrienne Rich (1980), who argued that the patriarchal definition of the erotic had limited the erotic itself, and that lesbianism should really be considered in terms of the wide variety of ...

“woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and

among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support; if we can also hear it in such associations as *marriage resistance* and the “haggard” behaviour identified by Mary Daly... we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of “lesbianism”.” (1980:648)

Moving ‘lesbian’ explicitly away from genital sexuality frustrated many women who felt that the recognition of the potential for sexual partnerships between women, was a struggle too important and too hard fought to be casually overlooked. While asserting the political choice of lesbianism as a choice *not* to have a heterosexual relationship was a powerful stance to make in a patriarchal and homophobic society, this put the Lesbian Feminist focus firmly upon gender politics, emphasising the ‘feminist’ at the expense of the ‘lesbian’. Indeed, many pre-feminist lesbians accused Lesbian Feminists of exploiting the lesbian in their title for what she could do for gender politics, without making any contribution to sexuality politics in return. The rise of the Lesbian and Gay movement with its focus on sexuality, brought this situation into sharp relief, and signalled the continuing tension between the two positions.

### **The debate about sex.**

Identifying the causes of, and finding solutions to the oppression of women was the cornerstone of the theory and political agenda of Lesbian Feminism. This included identifying heterosexuality as a discourse which had become naturalised through dominant ideology, and therefore the process by which heterosexuality had become the unquestioned site of emotional and reproductive relationships was scrutinised and challenged. Alongside this, sexual practices were analysed, and conclusions drawn about the relationship between violence towards women and the eroticisation of women’s subordination which Lesbian Feminists argued, heterosexual women, and lesbians involved in ‘male-identified’ behaviour often uncritically sustained. Sheila Jeffreys, making reference to MacKinnon wrote,



“MacKinnon argues that, “Male and female are created through the eroticisation of dominance and submission...”...Feminists such as MacKinnon and myself see the construction of sexuality under male supremacy as arising from the eroticised subordination of women. The project of those feminists who wish to eliminate male violence is the dismantling of the sexuality of inequality and its replacement by a sexuality of equality if women are to be free.” (1994:463).

This radical ideology was largely responsible for a lesbian exodus from feminism, and partly responsible for long term fractions within the Women’s Movement, with tensions and lack of trust arising from heterosexual women feeling alienated and attacked by lesbians who they perceived dominated the movement, and lesbian feminists feeling marginalized and excluded.

For Lesbian Feminists sex was a site of resistance, where criteria evaluating the relative success of that resistance could be invoked and applied to women’s sexual activities. It was argued that ‘male’ and ‘female’ were not categories which were naturally aligned with men and women, but described attitudes or actions which either sex could utilise. However, it was **male** actions and attitudes which Lesbian Feminists believed oppressed women, and therefore, for lesbians to behave in a male way was considered to be oppressive. Therefore, lesbian sex which involved SM activities, butch/ femme role playing, lesbian erotica/ pornography, and even penetration all came under severe criticism from Lesbian Feminists. Tamara Jordan explained how these politics entered into, and took effect in lesbians’ day to day lives,

“In 1983, I was a new, young lesbian...What I learned from my older, wiser sisters was that ‘goal-oriented phallocentric sex’...was something that nice girls don’t do... What women really liked in bed was plenty of tender, egalitarian clitoral massage, rolling on and on for hours.” (1996:35).

This led many lesbians to quit Feminism and to organise politically with gay men, providing evidence of the disillusionment experienced on being told that one was not a ‘real’ lesbian because of the particular ways in which one chose to have sex. Lesbian Feminists’ policing of sexuality also had major implications for pre-feminist lesbians whose culture was organised around butch/ femme roles and codes of behaviour. Not

only did the so-called political lesbians invade and occupy their identity, they then proceeded to make the rules on how it could be experienced.

In many ways, Lesbian Feminism appears as quite an oppressive movement, but I believe this is as a result of fears of charges of hypocrisy from other Feminists, for not living up to the utopian ideal of woman-identified life they believed was possible. However, one of the limitations of Lesbian Feminism I believe, is the failure to think beyond the belief that 'male' actions and attitudes are inherently oppressive. This prevents a critique of the system of thought which constructs knowledge along binary divisions and assigns differential value to each side of the dichotomy. In effect, it is the failure to enter into a discourse of power, whereby the implications of women embodying entirely 'female' qualities in a patriarchal culture are missed. The result has been for Lesbian Feminists to attempt to revalue the 'female' and reverse the power relation of the gender binary. While rediscovering traditional sources of 'women's knowledge', often rooted in Pagan traditions and centred around menstrual cycles and the Moon is empowering to a degree, this approach exists uncomfortably with the reality that the categories of male, female, masculine, and feminine are *all* constructs at the heart of women's oppression. Therefore, while Lesbian Feminism has generated a strong and incisive social criticism of gender relations as they affect everyday life, I believe it has failed to address the broader issue of the binary thinking behind the construction of gender.

### **Relationships with men.**

The tensions among differently identified and aligned lesbians, in part revolved around conflicting views on lesbians' relationships with men. An outcome of the lesbian exodus from Feminism was their pursuit of alliances with gay men, which resulted in a shift of political focus away from gender issues and onto sexuality. One implication of this was that, while this collaboration may have been effective in terms of challenging heterosexism and homophobia, and raising awareness and reducing prejudice around HIV and AIDS, it did little to simultaneously challenge sexism and androcentrism. While the misogyny of gay men often intended to exclude lesbians, almost as if they



didn't really count as women, it also defied lesbians to challenge it as this would have demonstrated a greater allegiance along the lines of gender than sexuality. A lesbian positioned exclusively within sexuality politics has no grounds on which to challenge misogyny within the movement as there is no recognised political allegiance between themselves and heterosexual women. Therefore, even if lesbians and gay men achieved equal status with heterosexuals under the law, lesbians as women, would remain in a subordinate position to men. This suggests that the Feminist agenda still retains at least some relevance for lesbian women. However, for lesbians to recognise this relevance would involve recognising, labelling and challenging gay men's misogyny, which incurs the risk of losing their political support for the shared fight against homophobia. What has to be decided is the extent to which the sexual freedom of lesbians depends upon their more general emancipation as women. If this is the case, what is needed is a political theory and strategy which simultaneously bevels gender and sexuality politics, in a movement which gets nearer to the centre of the situation.

The difficulty with this is that lesbian women do not share a common 'situation'. Women experience marginalisation along many lines of social stratification, all of which except gender, they will share in common with men. For lesbian women who are additionally marginalized, for instance through race, ability or age, the Feminist critique of misogyny presents a tension, in that it may threaten to alienate them within other social movements, which will perhaps be dominated by men and predominantly heterosexual. For these women, it may be neither gender nor sexuality which informs their most central identity, and Feminism may be experienced as a movement which fails to recognise the specificities of their social positioning. A substantial body of women are beginning to criticise Feminism for its marginalisation and denial of their differences, its inability or reluctance to meaningfully incorporate their experiences into its theory, and its suspicion of and hostility to their other political allegiances. Grant states,

“...feminists of late have followed insights proffered by women of colour and socialist feminists who now speak of female oppression as only one of many possible oppressions created by a web of power structures including but not limited to racism, patriarchy and capitalism.” (1993:140).



Feminism therefore, has been criticised for viewing gender as the only or central source of marginalisation in all women's lives, for failing to recognise and theorise around the ways in which women can experience oppression through a multiplicity of sources, and for a failure to understand the investments women might have in relationships with men in other social movements. This involves failing to acknowledge the diversity of the group 'women' on whose behalf Feminists claim to speak. The Lesbian Feminist position, while speaking from one position of 'difference', also fails to acknowledge lesbian women who are additionally marginalized. It is therefore important to begin to be able to think of experiences and politics multi-dimensionally, to be able to grasp the dynamic realities of individual lives, to conceptualise the tensions, and to imagine resolutions.

### **The Challenge of a Postmodern Construction of Reality.**

Central to the agenda highlighted above will be the conceptualisation of the categories 'woman' and 'lesbian', and a significant dividing factor between theorists is the question of whether a Modern or Postmodern conceptualisation best serves the political agenda. Various groups of women, lesbians among them, have criticised Feminism for theorising and organising politically around a universalised notion of 'Woman' which they argue, has led to their differences being overlooked while the interests of only a small number of women are advanced (Strickland:1994). One explanation of this phenomena, is that while Feminists have successfully critiqued Modernist epistemology for its strongly androcentric bias, revealing Positivist methodology and its truth claims as a discourse which seeks to privilege one perspective over all others, and argued for 'other' ways of knowing, they have failed to critique the Enlightenment model of knowledge upon which it is founded. While lesbians have been one group to challenge essentialism within Feminism, the resultant Lesbian Feminist theory is equally guilty of this, through its construction of a universal 'Lesbian' identity. The result of this is that all alternative knowledges, being similarly structured, are prone to be narrow, and based upon essential identities which become naturalised (Hekman: 1990). Placing individuals uncritically within the political classes of men and women,

assuming a universally parallel hierarchical relationship between them, and searching for transhistorical, transcultural explanations, ignores the differences which shape individual women's lives, and denies the reality of ever shifting meanings of identities, which are both independently negotiated within specific contexts, and influenced more broadly by social, historical and cultural contingencies. Weedon (1987) states that while Modernist discourses of the self assert and focus upon a unique, fixed and coherent essence within the individual, Postmodern discourses assert a subjectivity which is in process, precarious and constantly reconstituted in discourse. Thus subjectivity is viewed as a site of struggle, where meanings are negotiated and challenged. This is in conflict with Lesbian Feminist theory which views the meaning of all lesbian acts and identity to be stable, as an enduring aspect of resistance to patriarchy, while it similarly offers an alternative model of identity than those put forward in the papers critiqued in Chapter One.

The root of the problem, according to Postmodern Feminist theorists, is the uncritical reliance upon a dualistic ordering of the world. Thus our constructed understanding of the world through binary opposites is sustained, along with the value system which creates a hierarchy between the paired concepts. The Modern Feminist agenda on deconstructing this power relationship, has been to seek to revalue the 'female' at the expense of the 'male', to address the imbalance of power. However, Postmodern Feminists argue that this can never be a successful strategy, as the 'male' cannot be displaced as the frame of reference by which all Other is judged (Hekman:1990). A more productive strategy, it is argued, would be to challenge the very terms of the paradigm, revealing the relationship between the terms of the dualism to be interdependent and mutually implicative, rather than oppositional, as Modernism suggests. The outcome of this, it is suggested, would be to lead to the terms of each dualism being deconstructed out of relevant existence. The assumed reliance on fixed binary categories to structure political opposition is challenged by Penelope Engelbrecht (1990) in her assertion that lesbians, being outside of the phallic symbolic order, disrupt its borders and render its Truth nonsense. She argues that in the symbolic order where the phallus is the privileged sign, Woman is defined by her absence (of a penis) and objectified, and thus within Freudian and Lacanian philosophy is considered incapable of agency, which is conceptualised as male. This, she argues has been used to discredit women's opposition



to objectification. In contrast, Engelbrecht explodes this Truth as fiction by exploring how lesbian women disrupt the internal rules of the symbolic order, by being neither an object of male sexual pleasure, nor an objectifying lover of other women. Instead she argues, that through the lesbian woman's Other being a Self/Other a rupture occurs in the binary myth of Subject/ Object and renders its fictions apparent. Thus, the mutually exclusive nature of binary opposites is revealed as a discourse, and the possibility of women's opposition to objectification introduced to philosophy.

A further argument of Postmodern Feminists is, that by relying upon universal notions of identity, Modern Feminism is based upon a structure which is in opposition to its own agenda, and thus it is condemned to reproduce in its own theory the flaws which it critiques in others. Susan Hekman wrote,

“...feminism inherits a legacy which is thoroughly modernist, a legacy rooted in the emancipatory impulse of liberal-humanism and Marxism... Modernist values are very much a part of contemporary feminist positions... An alliance with modernism... can only result in a perpetuation of the Enlightenment/modernist epistemology that inevitably places women in an inferior position.” (1990:2).

By relying on inadequate epistemology, Lesbian Feminists it is argued, have become dependent upon the very categories which oppress them, namely those of ‘woman’ and ‘lesbian’. Thus they are faced with the problem of organising politically from a position which reinforces the inequality they seek to challenge (Wilton:1995). The question this dilemma poses for lesbians, is whether they wish to create and subscribe to a political strategy which actively seeks to make the identities around which political organising, (as well as social and personal identity and community) has evolved, obsolete. A fundamental argument therefore, for any Feminist theory to consider, is the extent to which retaining the category ‘woman’ is central to Feminist thinking, and what the implications of deconstructing gender categories out of relevant existence might be.

## Queer Theory.

Queer Theory has been developed out of Lesbian and Gay Studies and has become the most radical challenge to more dominant ways of thinking within the field. Its critique extends across what is perceived as the theoretical deficiency of many of the arguments advanced through Feminism, and into dominant discourses on gender and sexuality. Queer Theory presents alternative ways of looking at many of the issues raised above, by concentrating on the subversive potential of transgressive acts, and the necessity of deconstructing the categories which limit and control individuals. The following section will be organised under the following sub-headings:

- **Postmodernism and Poststructural Theory.**
- **Queer Theory as Political and Philosophical Challenge.**
- **Rules of Engagement.**
- **Parody and Camp.**
- **Queer theory, Camp and Gender.**

### Postmodernism and Poststructural Theory.

Queer Theory poses a significant challenge to many theories of sex, gender, sexuality and identity including the Lesbian Feminist position, as it draws upon Postmodernism and Poststructural Theory to assert an alternative to the Humanist conception of the self and subjectivity. Joshua Gamson offers the following definitions of Queer,

“*Queer* marks an identity that, defined as it is by a deviation from sex and gender norms either by the self inside or by specific behaviours, is always in flux; *queer theory* and *queer studies* propose a focus not so much on specific populations as on sexual categorisation processes and their deconstruction.”  
(2000:349)



However, within the theory, the terms Postmodern, Poststructural and anti-foundational are often utilised inconsistently. Poststructural Theory is based upon the analysis of language, with the process of meaning construction being interrogated. Language is believed to constitute reality, rather than merely express a reality which is already apparent, and therefore meaning is created in and through language. Therefore the meaning of 'lesbian' is constantly reconstituted according to the nature of the discourse within which it is invoked. This is important as it suggests potential space for disagreement and challenge, and for competing definitions to exist simultaneously. It also allows for difference and works against essentialist definitions. Based upon this assumption, Poststructural theorists then investigate the processes by which meanings are acquired, how these change, and how some become normative while others are relegated to lower or deviant status. Contestation over meaning is believed to take place within discursive fields, whereby 'Truth' is appealed to as a legitimating device to preserve dominant meanings. Part of the Poststructuralist agenda is to examine 'truth' and to reveal the constructedness of legitimation claimed as natural and beyond contestation. This it is argued has revealed the ideological nature of discourse, and enabled previously accepted meanings to be challenged. It has also revealed the limitations of, and situatedness of all subjectivity, and lead to a belief in the constantly reconstituted nature of individuals' experience and interpretation of reality. Consequently, it is argued that there is not now one accepted interpretation of reality, but multiple and conflicting definitions which compete for dominance (Scott:1990).

While the dynamic processes of meaning creation and contestation form the central core of Poststructuralist theory, the emphasis within **Postmodernism** is on the implications which the challenge to traditional sites of legitimation has opened up, and the outcomes for what is constituted as knowledge. The Modernist view of **knowledge** is that there is a single pre-existent Truth which one strives to discover through science, and which is called on as a legitimating device as an absolute grounding for knowledge (Scott:1990; Hekman:1990). This Truth is then characterised by grand narratives which provide meta theories to be applied across a diverse range of contexts and people within them. Examples of such theories would be Marxism and Psychoanalysis which hold a claim of universal truth as explanations of human and social behaviour and organising,

and therefore dismiss the impact which cultural and historical diversity may have for their universal validity and applicability. Such theories carve societies up into discrete groups of people and impose large generalisations upon them (Scott:1990; Hekman: 1990). The demise of foundationalism however involved the totalising narratives of Modernism being challenged as discourses and denaturalised, thus leading to their loss of credibility as legitimating devices. This, it is argued, lead to the reduction of the status of philosophy, as it can no longer be used to justify and ground theory.

The Postmodern concept of knowledge is based within the assumption of a multiple, contingent, discourse-centred reality (Grant:1993). The Postmodern concept of ‘truths’ is that they are discursively produced and therefore situational, thus the specific contexts within which knowledges are created are already implicated within the truth claims themselves. Thus the Postmodern model of legitimate knowledges emphasises context and detail, and the local, specific, micro level of experience. Thus under Postmodernism knowledge claims are partial, small scale and not widely generalisable (Nash:1994), while demonstrating an awareness of their limitations and limited applicability (Stacey:1988). Difference, specificity, contradiction and inconsistency are valued above uniformity and homogeny in providing an understanding of the multiplicity of social life, as opposed to the quest for congruity characteristic under Modernism. Patti Lather argues that Postmodernism represents a quest for “...different ways of knowing which do justice to the complexity, tenuity, and indeterminacy of most human experience.” (1988:570). Thus theory now apparently originates from a diversity of perspectives, which have been enfranchised to address their previous invisibility or misrepresentation (Fraser and Nicholson:1990). Thus it is argued that Postmodernism resists the hierarchisation of one perspective over any other, endorsing a democratic pluralism (Johnson: 1990). However, due to the relationship between knowledge and power, only the less powerful discourses, those least privileged, may be compelled to reveal their limitations, while the more powerful ones sustain the illusion of total knowledge and legitimating truth. Thus, I would argue that while many marginalized groups have been given a voice, they remain in opposition to the dominant, hegemonic perspective whose legitimacy remains largely intact.



Critiques of Postmodernism, including Feminist critiques are useful here, as they will provide a critical position from which to consider Queer theory next. The most widely recognised critiques come from Modernists, some of whom are Feminists, questioning the fundamental assumptions of Postmodern theory. Susan Strickland (1994) argued that Postmodern theory was not only inapplicable, but potentially very damaging to Feminism, while Anna Yeatman (1994), argued that there were two ways in which one could be positioned in relation to Postmodern theory. The dominant one, from which it acts as a means of containing the challenge to established authority; and the subordinate one, from which it seduces individuals to believe in their potential to challenge dominant discourse. Thus marginalized groups loose both ways, by having their oppositional discourses reconstituted within dominant discourse, while being lead to believe that they are making a valid challenge to mainstream thinking. Because of this, Strickland argued that Postmodernism was a dangerous theory to embrace. She argued that by asserting a democratic pluralism, whereby no position may be raised above any other, the potential to challenge oppressive ideologies was made impossible, as every view point is accorded equal status in the right to be heard. Strickland states,

“We are told to doubt radically ourselves and our subjectivity, our conceptions of the world and our possibilities of understanding and transforming it. This allows those already powerful to maintain their privilege while deflecting the threat of criticism and opposition, dissolving challenges to the legitimacy of their position. By appealing to the partiality and perspectivity of all human thought, while neglecting or forbidding structural analyses of power and inequality, or concentration on connection and relation as well as difference, postmodernism hides the implications of its own situatedness behind a screen of multiple but essentially incomparable, unconnected differences.” (1994:270).

In short then, Postmodernism pays lip-service to difference, as a strategy to maintain the status quo in the light of powerful attacks on the dominant group's hegemony from a range of disenfranchised sources.

Queer theory developed out of the radical Poststructuralist discourse on language and the creation of reality, and continues to exploit the potential of discontinuity and

instability articulated in Poststructuralist Theory. Furthermore it utilises the Postmodern reconfiguration of what constitutes legitimate knowledges to assert alternative narratives about sex, gender and sexuality, and to critique the ways these have been constituted in the past. I believe that it *does* offer a serious challenge to the persistent metanarrative of the existence of binary opposites within gender and sexuality, while the presentation of a utopian vision of a levelled society however acts as a screen for the marginality it fails to address. I intend to argue that although aspects of Queer theory appear promising for lesbian politics, its weaknesses need to be examined to establish whether the threat of lesbian invisibility within its paradigm can be addressed.

### **Queer as Philosophical and Political Challenge.**

At the root of Queer theory is the challenge to the dominant Western system of knowledge which constructs experience around polarities. It is argued that far from being oppositional, the categories within binary relationships are in actuality, intimately dependent upon one another to bring sense and meaning to their terms. The myth of opposition is sustained to conceal the transgression of these boundaries which actually occurs, and to render that transgression extraordinary and deviant when it does become apparent (Fuss:1991). This can be compared to Jean Baudrillard's argument that in Postmodern culture, the reality that certain events are commonplace is concealed by reporting them as scandal, which he calls 'a simulation of a scandal to regenerative ends.' (Story;1993:165). The purpose of concealing the transgression of boundaries is to sustain the false belief in essential identities, which allow one side of the binary division to be positioned as natural and good, and the other to be therefore classed as deviant. These categories also help to maintain the status quo as they provide a sense of security through that which is familiar and tangible. This is perhaps why a bisexual identity is positioned as deviant within both heterosexual and homosexual communities, as it contradicts the exclusively binary categories which the majority in both communities subscribe to. Jo Eadie states,

“If the main obstacle to the acceptance of bisexuality, in all its meanings, is the construction of ‘lesbian and gay’ around an opposition to opposite sex



desire, then the key issue for a theorisation of bisexual politics is the dissolution of those boundaries... Hence the anxieties centred on bisexuality can be read as expressing a very real fear of the collapse of a symbolic system: the heterosexual/ homosexual dyad.” (1993:154).

Part of the bisexual critique which is so powerful, is its attack on processes of normalisation, whereby revealing exceptions beyond the normal-abnormal matrix makes apparent the falsity of borders drawn up on myths of mutual opposition.

Queer theorists argue that what is needed is not another attempt to revalue and resignify the currently subordinate clauses of each oppositional dualism, but a challenge to the actual terms of the paradigm which constructs all knowledge around binary relationships (Hemmings:1993). Many Bisexual theorists have therefore found resonance within Queer Theory as the dismantling of the heterosexual-homosexual division is within their interests given their marginal position in both heterosexual and homosexual community and politics. Some Feminist theorists have also recognised the potential within Queer theory, and have produced a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between sex and gender through which the terms of the male-female binary are challenged (Delphy:1993). It is argued by Christine Delphy that the ‘truths’ of the body can no longer be uncritically accepted as legitimate, as sex like gender, is socially constructed through the reduction of the numerous components of physiological differentiation down to just one; the presence or absence of a penis. It is further argued that gender **precedes** sex, as a system of social stratification. Therefore what Delphy argued needs to be questioned is why sex should be the difference upon which a system of inequality is structured. Such arguments attempt to illuminate the processes through which sex and gender are socially constructed, and to therefore open them up to challenge and change. They also relocate the ‘problem’ for women in terms of their subordinate position, away from their physiology, their assumed and asserted ‘difference’ from men, and their gender socialisation, and onto the processes of power generation whereby ‘truths’ are asserted and sustained to maintain a particular pattern of power. This then clarifies the direction an oppositional politics must take, and renders the perpetrators of oppression and their methods more transparent. However, it yet again reduces the concept of women’s oppression to the single factor of gender, and it seems to

completely foreclose any possibility, and deny the necessity of combining a critique of gender with other sources of marginalisation.

The thought processes which Queer theory advocates then, whereby established relationships are dismantled and their terms manipulated randomly to create new and often radical ways of seeing things, encourages one to question the assumptions which are most central to one's current position. For me then, this involved questioning whether my research participants, as 'lesbian women' actually had to biologically be women. In the light of Christine Delphy's argument outlined above (1993) I then began to wonder what biological evidence would suffice, which was further compounded through my reading Jacob Hale's analysis (1996) of Monique Wittig's assertion that lesbians are not women. According to the list of criteria he drew up, I failed to qualify as a woman on several counts, and began to doubt my credentials for leading the study at all! While this approach appears to be a groundless, frivolous challenge to currently accepted knowledge and understanding around sex, gender and sexuality and particularly undermines the Lesbian Feminist position, it has been enthusiastically written about by Queer theorists, and some of the ideas publicly advanced by comedian Eddie Izzard in statements such as,

"I'm a lesbian trapped in a man's body." (1996:20)

and,

"When I go abroad, I say that I am two lesbians trapped in a man's body and we are cohabiting nicely." (1996:22).

While there has long been controversy within lesbian and Lesbian Feminist communities as to who and what lesbians are and were, the sex of lesbians has never been raised as a significant issue within these debates. There has, however, been disagreement over male to female transsexuals' rights of access to 'women only' spaces, with the most vocally dominant group demanding that these spaces be for 'women born women', but the issue of whether these women could be lesbians, or whether men could be, has never been given any significant coverage before Queer Theory emerged in the early 1990's.



## Performance as Political Activism.

Queer's radical theory enables one to question the assumption that all lesbians are women, as it asserts the performative nature of subjectivity, arguing that gender is 'a stylised repetition of acts' (Meyer:1994). Thus, because the self is continuously reconstituted, identities which are based upon socially constructed rules can be entered and exited as roles, thereby challenging the validity of identities based upon social practices being claimed as innate. The political strategy within Queer and Bisexual politics then, comes from subjects simultaneously embodying both categories of binary opposites. For instance, Queer subjects, through transgressive performance, can simultaneously occupy the space of both male and female, while bisexual subjects simultaneously occupy heterosexual and homosexual space. Thus meanings are in constant transition, having a destabilising effect through the suggestion of alternatives to binary classification. Clare Hemmings states,

“If the heterosexual gains meaning in performance, such bisexual opposite-sex performances *shift* the meaning of the same, if only incrementally. The fact that a bisexual double agent does not construct her 'I' on an exclusive diet of heterosexual acts or suppositions means that the cohesive structure of heterosexuality is undermined from within that performance, rather than in opposition to it. Heterosexual behaviour is forced to expand to contain the 'other' that it excludes to found its sense of self.” (1993:132).

If Hemmings is right, the challenge she describes bisexuals posing within heterosexuality will also be felt within lesbian and gay communities. The bisexual identity is so denigrated in lesbian communities, that lesbians have invented the category 'lesbians who have sex with men' to describe, what is in effect, bisexual sexual practice, to safeguard against having to relinquish the more privileged 'lesbian' identity.

According to Queer theory, 'lesbian' is not the privileged site of women but potentially accessible to anyone who wishes to enter into its performance mode, and doing so is central to the political strategy of Queer. Thus a man performing a female gender, could also perform a lesbian sexuality, while a lesbian performing a male gender with her girlfriend would be interpreted as a (queer) heterosexual act. These

performances, it is argued, reveal the ideological nature of gendered relations, and begin to deconstruct the power inequality inherent within them. However, Suzanna Walters (1996) argues that here a distinction needs to be drawn between the ability of a strategy to reveal the constructedness of certain relationships which are presented as natural, and the potential for these relationships to be deconstructed. She argues that just because something is revealed, its becoming discredited is not necessarily automatic or guaranteed. This is accurately descriptive of the current status of Queer politics, as the nature of gendered relations has been problematised, but a strategy by which the power relations within them are neutralised has not yet been conceived. Furthermore, Walters argues that Queer ignores the ways in which subjects are unequally positioned in relation to the ability and freedom to perform. She argues that to play and perform are vastly more available to those who have a strongly rooted and validated subjectivity, than those who struggle for recognition merely as viable subjects. It is also necessary to consider these 'performances' and rather than uncritically accepting that such shifts in subjectivity can and do occur, to consider the criteria by which the embodiment of any identity as successfully transgressive can be judged.

### **Parody and Camp.**

The 'fun' element of Queer politics comes from parody being central to its strategy. The theory is that the locus of power of the dominant group lies in their ability to control the meanings of representation, through the presentation of one view as natural and all others as fake or deviant. Thus, parody works with the signifying codes of dominant cultural forms to subvert them from the inside, from the belief that the only way of entering representation and securing an oppositional social presence, is to work entirely within existing structures of signification. The 'fun' comes through Camp being the privileged aspect of Queer parody. Moe Meyer states,

“...I define Camp as the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility.” (1994:5).



While in theory this strategy appears to hold transgressive potential, involving a consciously Queer social agent working within a performance mode, there are several flaws within Meyer's vision. Firstly, Camp as a type of parody, often relies upon the exaggeration and distortion of aspects of the identities inhabited, to make critical comment. Therefore, identities are not transgressed as such, but invaded, colonised and exploited for political potential. This is evidenced in men's drag acts, whereby women are not so much impersonated, as femininity (which is a cultural construct with no natural relation to women) exaggerated. While this may create a little critical distance on sexuality and gender, its established role in mainstream culture would suggest that it is not at the cutting edge of gender deconstructive politics. It also has none of the dangerously distorting feel of the **theory** which discusses **actual** identities rather than safely comical parodies, being transgressed. Indeed, a central criticism of Queer is that its theory is always too radical for attendant practice.

Secondly, as parody involves playing with existent identities and practices, there is a danger of merely reinforcing and reinscribing them as natural, rather than thoroughly deconstructing the identities out of existence, through not offering any new alternatives or ways of dispensing with them. My reservations about Queer's political strategy come from the belief that 'playing with the pieces' from a position of marginality, can be a dangerous and uncomfortable game if those pieces have previously been, and currently are used to create structures which are oppressive, as there is at least as much likelihood of reinscribing that which one seeks to challenge, as there is of revealing and challenging ideology. Meyer (1994) accepts this, stating,

"This piggy-backing upon the dominant order's monopoly on the authority of signification explains why Camp appears, on the one hand, to offer a transgressive vehicle yet, on the other, simultaneously invokes the spectre of dominant ideology within its practice, appearing, in many instances, to actually reinforce the dominant order." (1994:11)

The discomfort comes from appropriating those signifying codes as political strategy which simultaneously marginalize and negate one's experience through dominant discourse. Unless the social criticism within one's actions is clearly articulated and

widely understood, queer activists may find themselves perpetrating their own marginality.

A further threat to the efficacy of this strategy, is the continuous threat of co-option from mainstream culture. It is perhaps no coincidence that just as Queer emerges as a radical political force, there is a proliferation of sanitised and safe 'queer' images in the media. Suzanna Walters states,

“So these shifting signifiers of “queer” are never simply our own products, located solely in some sub-cultural netherworld..., but instead they move uneasily in and out of the “mainstream” as it recodes and cannibalises these new images, icons, activisms.” (1996:831).

While on first consideration this may appear to be a positive outcome of Queer's brand of in-yer-face politics, it is clear from Walters' analysis that there is a more sinister subtext which cannot be overlooked. The danger is that once images are under the control of the mainstream, their meanings can be altered and they can rapidly lose their radical potential. In this way, the mainstream can use a strategy which appears on the surface to advance and promote an alternative politics, to neutralise the threat which such a politics provides. The Queer strategy of parody then, seems to be more pragmatic than strategic, as fitting in with the mainstream and being Queer in safe, small doses appears at the moment, to be the only way to disrupt the heterosexual hegemony.

### **Queer, Camp and Gender.**

A further, even more incisive criticism which can be made of Camp as a political strategy, and one which Feminists in particular make, is that it fails to transcend the power inequalities of gender. While Lesbian Feminism is rightly criticised for its emphasis on gender at the expense of sexuality in terms of its theory and political strategy, Queer, in citing Camp as its central strategy ignores the power relations which make this an ineffectual political strategy for women to use. Through her analysis of gay men's successful use of female impersonation in theatre, whereby men communicate homoeroticism through performing female roles within heterosexual narratives, Kate



Davy (1994) is able to critique the non-transferability of male impersonation for lesbians. By arguing that men are foregrounded whether women are impersonating men, or men are impersonating women, she accepts that Camp is not widely useable. She states,

“...female impersonation, while it certainly says something about women, is primarily about men, addressed to men, and for men. Male impersonation has no such familiar institutionalised history in which women impersonating men say something about women. Both female and male impersonation foreground the male voice and, either way, women are erased... Female impersonation provides, in short, a seemingly endless source of fascination because, unlike male impersonation, the man who appropriates his “opposite” is not simultaneously effaced by it.” (1994:133/137).

Walters (1996) agrees, arguing that this type of transgression is male-centred whether or not the transgressor is male. Davy’s response to this is to suggest that lesbians adopt alternative performative strategies, and she elaborates upon femme-butch role playing as an example. However, surely articulating the need for differentiated male and female Camp invalidates Queer’s claim to be sex-gender unspecific, reinforcing the binary it seeks to deconstruct. It also foregrounds the necessity for continued Feminist involvement in the debate, as it seems that only those speaking from a Feminist position are prepared to question why the erasure of women is tolerated as a bi-product of Camp. Whether or not it is the intention of the Queer (male) subject to reinforce male hegemony through their transgressive political strategy, Modleski (1991) argues that by incorporating the female, males simultaneously recuperate and neutralise her power. This is disconcertingly like the warning made earlier to Queer activists whose co-option by the mainstream media results in their difference being packaged as a mainstream commodity, and their political power offset.

### Re-focusing my study.

At this point in the process, it was useful to consider how the reading I had done impacted on the development of my study. Therefore I will conclude this chapter by

exploring how the focus of the study gradually shifted, and how a contingent plan for enlisting research participants was developed.

Part of the Feminist critique of Postmodern theory has been that its emphasis on small, localised positions of legitimation can create divisions which preclude the possibility of collective action. Therefore I would argue that a new approach needs to be considered, through which marginalized individuals can act *collectively* based upon commonality, which at the same time recognises, values and is sensitive to the diversity of experiences within and across that commonality. As part of this project, *my* study focuses upon the group whose commonality is identifying as lesbian women, without presuming that this identity has equal significance in the lives of all the participants. Gender and sexuality are currently considered to be the central axes through which the members of this group would experience marginalisation. However, my study will start from a position of recognising that this assumption fails to give sufficient recognition to the complex and multiple interweaving of other axes of difference such as age, race and ability which lesbian women may also be marginalized in relation to. My study will therefore work from this new approach to explore the diversity of ways in which a lesbian identity is currently experienced.

The focus of my study will therefore be to illuminate the ways in which lesbian women experience and manage the changing meanings of their lesbian identities, exploring the factors which influence this, studying the different meanings which those identities have, and the implications of these, in terms of empowerment and marginalisation. A further aspect of the agenda will be to explore the ways in which diversity of experience can be used to contribute to a common cause, to challenge the assumption that it threatens collective action. This will have significant implications for methodology, as the ways in which participants collaboratively work to create a body of knowledge, may suggest a model for wider political organising. Therefore it will be important to work towards a theory which is responsive to, and based upon identities in transition, from which inter-contextual strategies of resistance can be developed, to challenge limiting and oppressive definitions.

In conclusion then, in terms of being ready to enlist a group of research participants, it is important that the invitation to participate is accessible and inclusive, to



encourage women from a variety of backgrounds to participate. This then raises the issue of making the invitation to participate in the research accessible to those for whom 'lesbian' may not necessarily be their primary identification, but one of several less prominent identities. It also raises the issue of how to ensure the information about my research and the invitation to participate reach as wide a variety of lesbian women as possible. I feel it is important to make a provisional statement about the parameters of the category 'lesbian' I now intend to employ for the purposes of enlisting research participants. Firstly then, the participants should be women (at a social level), as I feel this is crucial given the strongly Feminist agenda within the study, as while I intend to work with lesbian women, their identification and experience as women, in a patriarchal society, is the central factor within my research. Secondly, the participants will self-identify as lesbian, recognising that identity as describing them to a certain degree. The extent to which that identity is central or marginal within each woman's life will not be considered an issue at the stage of gathering participants, but will become relevant during the study as part of the area of enquiry. There will be no formal definition of what I understand the meaning of the identity 'lesbian' to be within the publicity I distribute, as a diversity of understanding of this among participants is central to the study. This procedure is consciously in opposition to the Lesbian Feminist conceptualisation of what 'lesbian women' are, while it also denies the radical transgression of the Queer approach which is not necessarily sensitive to Feminist issues.

25/2/00

I was quite disappointed when I read Amber's conclusions about who she intended to invite to take part in her study, because I felt excluded by it. I'm not a lesbian, and the other differences she mentions do not exactly include me either, but I know that if I had have been around then, I would have been interested in talking about some of the things the research was about. It seems weird that she ended so narrow when she

explained Queer theory to me as being so broad. I had felt really excited when she was telling me about it, and knew what she meant when she said it set her free. I remember staring at her and wondering what she thought of me. We spend a lot of time together and get on really well, and we talk about loads of dead interesting stuff. So I asked her about ending up being so narrow, and she smiled. She said that that's why we get on so well. Because I think that where she ended up then was narrow. She said that that's how she knows I won't be freaked by where the study goes, and where she went with it. I felt quite proud when she said that. I wonder again what she thinks of me.

1/3/00

I got so angry with Amber at the end of the last chapter we wrote when she decided who her participants could and couldn't be. I screamed at her "I'm not a lesbian, how dare you exclude me!" Once I'd calmed down she told me about how the group of participants expanded anyway, and it moved away from being purely about lesbian women. I apologised later but she said it was okay. She said since her accident people are afraid of getting angry with her and she was relieved when I did. Amber told me a bit more about what she'd actually done over the past few years. She said the study really happened in three parts, and that now was probably a good time to explain the practicalities of the first part. So we've been working on a chapter about what she did.



(Things are starting to get crazy here. I miss you Andy. I feel angry all the time, constantly wanting to kick out and hurt somebody. Why did you leave me? You were my best friend and you just walked away. I needed you but you couldn't handle it.)

## Chapter Three.

### Practical approach to the study.

#### Introduction.

In this section I will explore the practical ways in which I carried out the first part of the research programme, and show how the choices I made were informed by theory and my developing thinking in line with the reading I was doing simultaneously. I considered the process which I and my participants would go through in order to generate the findings from the study to be equally important, and this is in line with Liz Stanley who states,

“Succinctly, academic feminist unalienated knowledge is that which concretely and analytically locates the product of the academic feminist labour process within a concrete analysis of the process of production itself.”  
(1990:12)

I furthermore located myself firmly at the centre of this process, as a present and visible agent in the study. Locating myself within the process openly, and explicitly articulating this was part of my growing interest in the *process* of research and the ways in which meaning is constructed. However, at the first phase of fieldwork this involved testing out where I was starting from in order to understand how I wanted to move forward. Thus in this chapter I intend to explain what I did, in the context of the thinking I was doing about methodology. The writing will be organised under the six headings of:

- Participation
- Recruiting Participants
- The Interviews
- Areas of Negotiation
- Tensions
- Transcribing the Interviews.



## **Participation.**

I began the fieldwork thinking that I wanted to work with a group of lesbian women to explore their experiences of identity construction and maintenance, but without really knowing what methods would be best employed for my purposes. At the beginning of my search for appropriate research methods, I drew upon the perspective of Carole Truman who believed that,

“The task of using women’s experiences as the basis for social analysis is so great that it beckons approaches that are distinct within themselves.”  
(1994:25)

Thus my idea of using art making within the study was resonant with this belief, although I had not, at this stage finalised the form this would take. I tentatively chose to begin from Shulamit Reinharz’s model of a feminist case study (1992) predicting that a group of ten local women might be appropriate to start with. According to Reinharz a case study involves exploring social phenomena through thorough analysis of an individual case. In terms of my research project I suggested that the individual case would be the small group of women, and the focus their experiences of multiple marginality. Reinharz states,

“The case study is a tool of feminist research that is used to document history and generate theory. It defies the social science convention of seeking generalisations by looking instead for specificity, exceptions and completeness. Some feminist researchers have found that social science’s emphasis on generalisations has obscured phenomena important to particular groups, including women. Thus case studies are essential for putting women on the map of social life.”(1992:174)

This approach seemed congruent with my leaning towards the Postmodern conception of knowledge and reality in terms of its emphasis on specificity, and my commitment to challenging lesbian stereotypes allowing for the presentation of alternative realities. However, I was unsure how ultimately compatible Feminist research methods would be

within a Postmodern study, due to the roots of Feminism being based within Enlightenment thinking. Thus I anticipated that the study would develop and change, not only in terms of content but in terms of methodology as well.

Nevertheless, I felt at this stage that a start had to be made somewhere, and I also believed that a Feminist case study offered a structure by which the participants could be intensely present within the study, due to its small scale nature. This was important as the problematic issue of my own presence and role within the research was foregrounded through Feminist discussions of control and ownership in participatory research. I was keen to make participation an empowering process, and modes and levels of representation within the study seemed key within this. Furthermore, I was unsure how to preserve the individuality of the participants when the unit of study for the case was the group. However, I began from the same premise as Patti Lather (1988) who argued that through careful presentation of the voices of multiple participants, many perspectives may be heard simultaneously about one subject. Thus the individuality of each participant may remain while the one subject in question was illuminated.

### **Recruiting participants.**

I decided to formulate and distribute an advert to describe my study and to invite those interested to participate. At the time, I was very conscious of inclusivity as it was a subject I was particularly sensitive to within the local lesbian community. However, as Sharon Jacobson (1995) highlighted through research with older lesbians, denoting the population of potential research participants was problematic as competing definitions of 'lesbian' existed simultaneously. My concern was to actively recruit lesbian women without restricting who would respond through the imposition of my own understanding of that identity. I had also moved on in my reading to recognise other factors in a woman's life which may exclude or marginalize her from the lesbian community despite her sexuality 'fitting', such as disability, age, religion, and parental status. I was therefore left with the dilemma of wanting to be as explicitly inclusive as possible, while realising that as my advert became increasingly specific it became increasingly exclusive.



I therefore decided to describe the feelings of exclusion, marginality, discomfort, and pressure to conform which a woman may experience, both on the local lesbian scene and within mainstream culture. I tried to make the advert resonant for women at every stage of the coming out process, whether bisexual *or* lesbian, and I chose not to use labels which might alienate people, but to talk in terms of relationships, spaces, events etc. In many ways the advert was ambiguous and could be interpreted in multiple ways so as to create the space for women to bring their own reality into their reading of it, rather than risk estrangement through the presence of a single word which didn't fit (see appendix W). However this also opened up the possibility for non-lesbian readings of the advert, and out of the dilemma this posed, and in line with reading I was doing around anti-discriminatory research methods I decided to consider sexuality more broadly and approach potential participants from the perspective of their unique experience, rather than from the supposed commonality of lesbian experience. This was important as the respondents came with a range of experiences and sexual identities, and the multiplicity and difference added to the study rather than detracted. This was a key shift in the study at this early stage, and was strong evidence of the impact which reading around social exclusion was having upon my ways of thinking.

I sent out 400 separate copies of the advert to public spaces in a forty mile radius such as libraries, community centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux, and to specific community based support and political groups active in the fields of race and racism, disability, age and ageing, the arts, as well as to a wide variety of women's groups. Several publications including a national lesbian life and style magazine, a disability arts magazine, a local listings paper with a Queer-focused page, and a women's art magazine also published details of the study. A copy of the advert was available in Braille, and it was included in an issue of the local talking newspaper. Due to lack of resources and contacts, I was unable to get the advert translated and distributed into any other languages, but it was sent to women's groups organised within and for local minority ethnic communities. It was important for me to target venues which ordinarily were not specifically designated as lesbian or gay spaces, to attempt to reach women who perhaps felt unwelcome or outsiders within such places.

I arranged to have a P.O. box, so as to not have to put my home address on the advert which would be sent out to hundreds of venues. While this was necessary protection, it felt uncomfortable that I was asking respondents to accept the sort of risk I was unwilling to take, as they had to respond to an unnamed box number (a feature I would change in future), and to enclose their name and address (they sometimes also chose to enclose a phone number) to get a reply. In this context then it is interesting that of the seven women who replied and got involved with the study, three had seen the advert in a lesbian magazine, one got it as a hand out from a local lesbian support group she attended, and one saw it in a national women's art magazine. Only three people responded to the advert displayed on a notice board, and two of these saw it at their university. The third woman who saw the advert on a notice board in a cafe did not get back in touch after I sent her a copy of the interview questions. Thus perhaps of all the places I sent the advert, these were the only spaces where it was seen and considered safe to respond to. This is particularly interesting in terms of the amount of resources such as money, time and paper which were dedicated to disseminating the publicity as widely as possible.

### **The interviews.**

Ten people replied to the advert altogether over a period of about two months. Six of them were local women, three were women who lived in the UK but outside the local area, and one was a woman in the USA. I decided to expand the study to include the women from outside the local area because of their interest and enthusiasm for the study, and thus I devised a way for the women who I couldn't necessarily physically meet, to participate in a postal version of the interview. I decided to ask the postal participants to answer the interview questions by talking into a tape recorder, so as to capture the subtleties of expression and nuance in the voice, and to remove the potential for editing and revision which naturally takes place when putting pen to paper. I was concerned that if I sent out the set of interview questions and solicited written replies, it would become more like a questionnaire, and I was dubious about the depth of information the participants would share. Of the three women that this procedure was relevant for, two



agreed to the self-interview strategy I suggested, while one insisted that she felt more comfortable writing her responses to the questions. However, she chose to drop out at this stage, as did two of the local women without explanation. In terms of the woman from America, I was concerned about safeguarding her anonymity and confidentiality if Customs and Excise opened the tapes and played them, so I thought it safer to ask her to reply in writing. Thus seven participants were interviewed overall.

One interview took place in the participant's room in university halls of residence, two were carried out in a local library study room, and the fourth was done in a room in the University. I found it quite difficult to find appropriate spaces to do the interviews. It would have been nice to go to a cafe for a coffee to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere, but I was afraid that this public space would inhibit the women in terms of what they felt able to talk about and compromise their anonymity. I was also concerned that the background noise would interfere with the tape recording. The interviews can therefore be considered in three lots; those I did face to face; those done by post on tape; and the one done by post in writing. The questions were more or less the same for each, (see appendix K). The face to face interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and all were recorded on tape and later transcribed. The postal interviews done on tape were similarly transcribed. I did a pilot interview with my partner at the time, which went deceptively well as she had been quite involved in the development of the study, and therefore she had a clear idea of what I was doing. Therefore she answered my questions with ease and flair, which concealed the complex nature of some of the questions. I later made changes to the questions and continued to tinker with the wording of them from one interview to the next in response to the reception they got.

### **Areas of negotiation.**

Before the interviews I created a confidentiality agreement which I copied for each participant and discussed at the beginning of each interview (see appendix L). In it I clearly stated what I would and wouldn't do with the material from the interview, and I created a set of participant rights. The agreement was open for negotiation, and each participant could request for certain bits to be added, amended or omitted until they were

happy with the agreement. At this point the agreement was signed by both of us, and we each kept a copy as a record. It then remained open to amendment by the participant for as long as she remained involved in the project, and was also designed to protect her if at any stage she decided to cease her participation. The same process applied for the postal interviews, and negotiations occurred via transactions through the post.

The decision to begin data collection through conducting interviews was taken due to my feeling it would be a good way of initiating dialogue, establishing relationships and getting a feel for other perspectives around the issues I was interested in. Interviewing also felt accessible in terms of the participants' potential understanding of the method, as it is a format used in many contexts for a range of purposes. Reinharz states,

“By listening to women speak, understanding women's membership in particular social systems, and establishing the distribution of phenomena accessible only through sensitive interviewing, feminist interview researchers have uncovered previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience.”(1992:44)

I therefore felt it would be a good way of establishing a context for the issues being discussed. In terms of becoming acquainted with interviewing techniques and principles I focused immediately on Feminist approaches, and felt relieved that I hadn't previously come into contact with Positivist methods, as both Ann Oakley (1981) and Janet Finch (1984) described their struggles with traditional interview techniques before being able to validate a Feminist approach. I on the other hand was fortunate enough to have these approaches ready validated in Feminist literature, with no prior baggage in that respect to impede my appreciation of them.

The central features for consideration which Oakley put forward, and Finch agreed with, were the quality of social interactions within the interview situation, including how both parties are feeling; the type of rapport which is considered appropriate to foster with a participant; classification of reliable and valid data; and the relative active and passive roles of interviewer and interviewee. In Oakley's resolutions of these tensions, interview situations between women must be non-hierarchical as a moral priority, and thus both parties may question and answer, to achieve a situation where both invest and both benefit from the situation. This then has a knock on effect for the quality of the data



collected, and on which aspects of the interview are considered important as data. Furthermore, this allows both parties to be 'active' within the process potentially making it more dynamic. This approach very much goes against the Positivist model in which detachment is stressed and supposedly 'uncontaminated' data collected. However, I favoured the Feminist model as it allowed the interview to be constructed as a forum for the collaborative creation of knowledge, which fitted with the Poststructural concept of reality as discursively produced. This recognised my belief that reality did not exist independently 'out there' to be discovered through my questioning, but would come into being through our interactions in the interview situation.

Oakley (1981) and Finch (1984) both stressed the political implications of women interviewing women, in terms of the moral indefensibility of objectifying one's 'sisters', and the need for collaborative relationships which dismantle the researcher-participant power differential. While their suggested methods offered a framework by which much of this may be initiated, Andrew Herod suggested that the commonality of gender between researcher and participants may not transcend power differentials as easily as imagined. He states,

“Even when interview participants are of the same sex, gender relations not only still shape the social interactions between researcher and interviewee, but they also underpin the very context within which the interview itself takes place.”(1993:306)

What I think Herod is saying is that gender relations exist within interactions *between* women, as well as between men and women. There are also many other factors which produce unequal relationships between women which will have a bearing on an interview situation. I therefore approached the interviews with a clear political philosophy in mind, yet had reservations and concerns which touched upon technique, gender relations, and sexual(ity) politics.

### **Tensions.**

My central concerns about conducting the interviews were the possibility of the conversation drying up after 10 minutes, the women not liking me and me offending or

oppressing them in some way, my appearance in terms of what sort of lesbian I should present myself as, and to what extent to try and share my own experiences with the participants to make it more of a two way transaction. To begin with the first; Reinharz (1992) states that the duration of the interview should be one of a researcher's central considerations. I conducted my first round of interviews convinced that the amount of data collected indicated the *quality* of data collected and therefore I created a fairly long semi-structured interview schedule, to ensure I had enough questions to keep me and the participants going. This was also partly because of the complexity of what I was looking at, and my desire to cover the subject as thoroughly as possible to allow the women to express themselves from a variety of angles on the same thing. As I played back the tapes and read the transcripts, I realised that an outcome of this approach coupled with my inexperience as an interviewer was that when the conversation dried up, I most often went on to the next question, rather than pursuing an avenue the participant had opened up. Thus at times issues were left unelaborated.

Secondly, I did want to be liked by the women I interviewed. I felt that this would lead to greater co-operation, and I was also aware that I might want to go back and talk to them again at a later date, and so I needed that to appeal to them. England (1994) suggests that there are three styles of research relations which can be fostered by researchers, and these are reciprocal, asymmetrical or exploitative, while the researcher can take on the approach of intimidation, ingratiation, self-promotion or supplication. She argues that Feminists often use supplication within a reciprocal approach, which acknowledges the participants' greater knowledge on the subject at hand and seeks therefore to shift power within the research relationship in favour of the participants. While my intention was for the relations to be reciprocal, I probably used all four types of approach at some time. This was mainly due, I think, to my lack of interviewing skills and experience, and my anxieties about getting the 'right' data and being liked. Therefore if I felt intimidated by the participant I would begin with ingratiation and move on into supplication, whereas if I felt that the participant was less confident I might have been slightly intimidating to press that advantage to sustain the conversation.

I think my use of these approaches was also influenced by the expectations the participants appeared to have of me. Some of these expectations included for me to have



all the answers; to fit with their concept of an 'artist'; to conform to some stereotype of a student, or of a lesbian or whatever. Some of these expectations constructed me as more powerful and some as less so. This final point made me particularly conscious of the way I physically presented myself at the interviews; whether to look butch or femme, organised or chaotic, calm and confident or nervous. As the dominant lesbian appearance stereotypes were a central issue in my own personal thinking at around the same time, my appearance, and how it was interpreted was a major consideration. Of the four women I interviewed face to face, two had come out as lesbian or dyke in their correspondence with me, while two had not mentioned sexuality but had intimated resonance with the content of the advert. My main concern was to deviate sufficiently from the dominant sub-cultural lesbian dress code to communicate my non-conformity, while not wanting to come across as 'passing' as this may threaten to alienate me from women who lived with the dangers of not passing as part of their politics. Sue Scott (1984) suggests that it is established practice to employ personable and coquettish young women as interviewers as they are thought to get the 'best' results. This type of interpersonal observation is relevant when one considers a lesbian interviewing context, as although the sub-cultural attractiveness norms deviate often extensively from the mainstream, the same type of impact would be expected. I could replace the words 'personable and coquettish' with 'boyishly androgynous' and one **might** assume that this type of interviewer would get the 'best' results from lesbian participants, based on that community's appearance stereotypes. However, one must question how ethical it is to use potential sexual attraction as a means of eliciting in-depth and personal data from participants, not to mention how disempowering for the interviewer to so objectify herself. While my intentions for considering my appearance were ethically justifiable, the potential permutations of interpretation often left me feeling I was playing with fire.

Finally I spent a long time considering to what extent I should share information about myself and my experiences in the interviews, and this line of thinking came from reading around the ethics of interviewing and Feminist perspectives about this. Humphries and Truman (1994) argued that if you are invested in the research as an individual, then allowing one's own identities to inform the research can be very valuable, and that this may involve some degree of self disclosure. I decided that I would

explain to the participants that they could ask me questions during the interview as well, and that I would also offer information about myself where appropriate to make the process of disclosure a joint one, in a sense to try and level the feelings of vulnerability. However, I was concerned that when questions were asked they would construct me as the 'expert', rather than as an accomplice in constructing shared knowledge. The responses I got to my self disclosure were mixed. One participant appeared to feel that my personal input was irrelevant, and she seemed keen to talk about herself without my interjections about myself, and thus the comments I made which attempted to clarify what she had said got a better response than information divulged about myself. With another participant, our common experiences made my sharing quite affirmative for both of us, and we seemed able to extend and challenge our own ideas through considering our different perspectives on similar events and experiences. Shulamit Reinharz (1992) warns that disclosure may lead participants to stereotype the researcher, and to consequently then try and give her the kinds of answers she is after. Nevertheless it is important to remember that the participants will be using a whole range of non-verbal cues to construct a stereotype of the researcher anyway. Sometimes I came out of an interview feeling quite good while other times I came out feeling ineffectual as an interviewer. According to Reinharz (1992) this experience is common, as she argues it can be hard to empathise with participants whose reasoning is radically different to one's own, while any aspect of one's identity can obstruct or heighten empathy. What is important, she argues, is to recognise and be explicit about the impact of this.

### **Transcribing the interviews.**

Transcribing was an arduous process as I was conscious of the importance of representing what someone had said exactly word for word, which is supported by Catherine Kohler Reissman (1987). This meant hour upon hour of careful listening and repetitive cross checking, and the reality that I just could *not* make out certain words or phrases. It was also difficult to know how to demarcate expression and denunciation, to put in pauses and to measure their length in relation to one another, and to differentiate consistently between erm, umm, err and urm. The importance of these in conveying the



meaning of sentences was sometimes crucial but at other times seemed less relevant. It was also difficult to notate subtle changes in volume, accent, or dialect; to put in sarcasm etc; and it was also problematic to write in keeping with the participants' dialect without descending into a totally phonetic method of spelling. However, transcribing was also a very useful process in many ways in that it forced me to really listen and hear what was being said, and to realise that I had forgotten as much as I had retained. It also indicated how sub-textual messages can easily be missed, as one interview seemed particularly jolly, as the participant and I seemed to get on, and we laughed and joked throughout. However, as I was transcribing it I was struck by the anger present beneath the woman's use of humour which I had totally missed at the time.

The postal interviews which were answered on tape were sent back to me and I transcribed them. When transcribing the first of the tapes, the discomfort in the voice of the participant was acute at times and it made transcribing a very uncomfortable process for me. I began to realise exactly what I had asked these women to do: to answer questions about intimate aspects of oneself, on a tape and send it back to a P.O. box which only had a name, rather than an identity or personality, and to just trust that these would be treated with respect and sensitivity. In response, once the interview had been transcribed I interjected with bits of information about myself, this time being very honest and open even though I felt uncomfortable about it, and I also slipped in supplementary questions to get a bit more information about some of the things she had begun to talk about. During this process I realised that despite the difficult circumstances, the woman had been very open in answering the questions, and my response made the whole process feel quite intense and positive, and I got a warm and positive response to this, which resulted in a dynamic interactive transcript. It appeared that the safety in anonymity had in many ways outweighed the hazards of separation in the process. The written response by post from the USA was initially less satisfactory. As I had feared the written reply lacked depth and length, and while disclosure took place, this was in a limited and superficial way. I had six pages of text in comparison to 16-23 pages of typed transcript. In response I sent a supplementary set of questions probing deeper into some of the issues she had raised. The reply was more satisfactory, and therefore a process of correspondence was established to gradually build up a picture

of the whole which had depth and clarity. Sets of questions, along with a commentary from my own experience were sent, and the replies were collated as parts of a whole.

Thus the first round of data collection was complete, and I was left with a set of transcripts to analyse. The process left me with key issues which I hoped to pursue including the ongoing construction of 'safety' within the process, ways of developing the collaborative nature of the study, questions around the ways in which knowledge is constructed and shared, and concerns about analysing the data in isolation.

10/3/00

I feel bad for having a go at Amber but it doesn't stop me doing it again. I'm on an emotional roller coaster with this stuff and I feel out of control. Now I'm really slap bang in the middle of it. I wonder what these women were asked and what they said. I read the appendix which is the questions and think about how I might have answered them. Amber says she thinks the questions are crap now. Too bizarre, and definitely coming too much from where she was at, without considering where the participants might be. I don't know. They **are** hard questions. I think those women had to be really courageous to look at themselves that closely, especially with a total stranger. I make notes in a separate jotter when I get off at night about things that have come to me through the day. I'm too scared of them being seen to write them in the main one. I'm working my way through the questions. In a way I want to do that before I find out what the women said about them. I want to know my own answers first. Amber doesn't know I'm doing this. I don't think she'd mind.



She's really into people coming to know who they are, and being creative and open to who they can still be. I want this so much.

18/3/00

It's hard sometimes being here by myself. Amber asks how I can feel alone when I spend such long hours being her assistant. I say I need the money and it's not the same anyway. You can be alone even in a crowded room. The questions clatter round my head. Some of the answers which come screaming like demented bats out of the darkest parts of my mind make me sick. Everything is turning upside down. I want to come home.

25/3/00

I feel more settled now. Amber was great when I felt crap. We worked together on the next bit of reading and writing she'd done. The stuff she was reading as she carried out the data analysis on the first set of interviews. She said she thought I'd probably get loads out of it. I did. I could see how her understanding of her participants opened up and changed, became more inclusive and less prescriptive. I was also fascinated by what the women said in reply to her questions. I wondered if any of them were like me. I relaxed a bit. I felt more anonymous again. I felt that this was when Amber really took what she wanted from Queer theory. The freedom she had talked about, but had criticised Queer for not delivering on, she began to find in her own head by peeling back the edges which seemed to hold people in. I've been trying to peel back my

own edges recently. We talked about gender. And sexuality. And being open to changes in understanding about who we are.

The latest bit of mine and Amber's writing explains about how she threaded the issues from the data through the literature, and how the result lead her to a metamorphosis of her own. I like that word... metamorphosis.



## Chapter Four.

### The process of data analysis. Part one.

I had a full set of completed transcripts gathering dust in a file on a shelf in a room in my house where I didn't have to go very often and I basically ignored them for six weeks because I was scared of them. I was scared because I didn't know what data analysis really was or how to do it, and because I was worried about developing interpretations about other people's material. Now in September 1998 having completed the process of data analysis I am struck by how many things have changed since I started the research. These changes have occurred within myself personally in terms of how I perceive myself and in my understanding of the study, in the way the study is conceptualised in terms of content and focus, and in the impact which the literature has had on both of these. This has shifted some perspectives and brought others into sharper focus. The research group is no longer restricted to 'lesbian women' as the advert which went out to recruit participants was intentionally ambiguous, to recruit people who had resonance with particular experiences, rather than specific identities, and the participants' data supported this decision and valuably widened the focus of the study. The focus of the research thus extended to wider issues of social inclusion, power relations and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the people who responded to the advert potentially had a range of identities which emerged or receded depending on the situations they were in, and it was this level of negotiation of situations I became more interested in. These developments made Kamini Chaudhary's critique of socially constructed roles particularly resonant. She states,

“Pressure to be butch, femme or androgynous becomes a burden when one loses sight of one's own preferences and needs. Identity itself is rather free-flowing, forever changing shape. The clothes you like today, the look you adopt, the views that you hold are all subject to change over time. It's not about being lesbian, straight or bisexual, it's not about being politically correct or incorrect; it is about being human.”(1993:58)

This transience is exciting as it signifies important shifts in understanding and perspective for myself as researcher and for the study as a whole. Therefore while the study began as an investigation into lesbian women's experiences of their gender and sexual identities, it has now developed to encompass the larger concept of social stratification, and to consider how multiple modes of oppression intersect and interrelate. Thus within this chapter, I intend to present the findings from the data in terms of how they relate to the literature, thus rather than investigating the ways in which lesbian lives diverge, I intend to examine the overarching processes of marginalisation, which position **individuals** in a hierarchical system of social privilege. I intend to problematise the process of oppression rather than individual differences, to focus on the institutional sphere as a means of better understanding the individual lives of the participants. This chapter will also indicate the way I came to think about the study in new ways and will clarify the new direction the study began to take.

While the focus of the study has shifted, it is still concerned with a group of women, and therefore this writing will be a discourse primarily *about* women, although by implication it is then also about 'men', as this is the category by reference to which 'women' has any meaning. In writing about women, a group who are marked as 'not men' by power relations which construct difference through a complex system of biological sex and socially constructed gender, I am not assuming a homogenous group for whom gender, as a mark of separation and difference from men, forms the central thread of consciousness. I am instead conceiving of a group of people who are marked significantly as 'not men', but for whom the material reality of which is vastly different, and who additionally and often to a greater extent are marked, and therefore socially constructed, along many lines of social definition shared also by men. It is therefore this *difference within* the constructed category 'woman' which will enable me to introduce the concept of individuals simultaneously experiencing privilege and oppression, to begin to challenge the monolithic theories of 'women's oppression' and 'male hegemony'. I wish to analyse the interrelationship of oppressive social structures, which in combination create and sustain a hierarchised nexus of power and privilege.

I eventually started to read the transcripts then, and I read them over and over again, trying to immerse myself in their words and lines, and become very familiar with



them. I also made use of the tape recordings and listened to them in the process of trying to become immersed in the data. I was aware that the participants had shared stories with me about themselves, and that what I wanted to do was to report back on those stories as a whole, to talk about the group's responses to my questions, and to draw out some observations from there. I had no hypothesis to prove or disprove, but a set of questions which had prompted the initiation of this study, and the participants' responses which would illuminate the issues in multiple ways.

However, during the process of data analysis and the putting together of this chapter which followed it, I faced several dilemmas regarding the process of data analysis. Firstly I became concerned that I would work egocentrically, and that the data would be used to validate my own ideas about self and identity. I was concerned that the data should be at the centre of the process, but I wondered how I would organise and contextualise the participants' material when it failed to resemble my own. Catherine Kohler Reissman (1987) warns of the danger of a researcher with her own agenda either mis-interpreting what she hears, hearing in addition of what the narrator says, or understanding in a way alien to the narrator. While the researcher will always understand the data differently to the participants simply by being a separate person, what Kohler Reissman is warning of is this going untheorised and the participants' data being reappropriated to support the researcher's agenda. To mediate these concerns I paid particular attention to the parts of the participants' transcripts which were in conflict with my own beliefs, attitudes and opinions, and attempted that these views were equally represented as those I had resonance with. I was also determined to report back to the participants about the conclusions I had drawn, to enable them to challenge me, and to enter into a dynamic process of knowledge construction, through the reconstruction of my interpretations.

I also worried that I would impose my own interpretation on the participants' material, creating a one-dimensional response. Shulamit Reinharz (1992) argues that hearing other people's stories prevents a researcher from merely generalising from her own experience. However, this may only be the case if she is explicitly committed to attending to specificity and contradiction. If she is, the reading of other stories should act in the same way as putting on someone else's spectacles: all of a sudden one's own vision

is wrong, and one has to work hard to make out reality from this new perspective. In so doing, one should not only learn about another point of view, but about one's own. Acquiring, if only temporarily, several other perspectives should facilitate the diversity of reality to be appreciated. Jane Haggis states,

“One part of my project is to tease out as many of these layers of interpretation as I can. It is only in the telling of the many experiences, remembrances and constructions of the colonial relationship... that a hint of its ‘reality’ might be gained. No one voice can be privileged without risking the slighting of another, a danger sufficiently echoed in the manufactured silence of women’s voices in the telling of history.”(1990:76)

I thus attempted to hear each individual voice, and to preserve that individuality, in order for several stories to be told within one report. By using a structure dictated largely by the questions I brought my own agenda into play, while promoting the individuality of each participants’ response to each theme created a multifaceted analysis whereby other agendas were articulated.

One of the tensions of presenting the data with analysis of the literature was the fear of losing the individuality and coherence of each narrative through chopping it up and re-presenting it. There was also the attendant danger of the data losing its resonance for participants once it had been sliced up and re-packaged. Furthermore, I was aware of the danger of losing the subtleties within the narratives as instances where brief comments illuminated stories told twenty pages earlier were numerous. However, separating out the issues was also valuable as this facilitated a clearer comprehension of individual issues, while connections also emerged which allowed for a process of jigsawing to take place. This occurred when data would have appropriately fitted under more than one theme, or when points raised became more resonant in the presence of additional data. The relevance of the literature also extended my understanding of the data and they dovetailed nicely. This fitting together of discrete pieces allowed for inter-textual understanding, but also required recognition that in attempting the jigsaw, I drew on maps to delineate the shapes of the joining pieces which may have been quite different than those the narrators would have used to map their own reality. It is therefore important to recognise the role of the researcher at this stage, and to be aware that in key



ways, my narrative will also have come through. Therefore it is important to acknowledge here that this chapter is the story of my understanding of the participants' data and how it relates to the literature. However, it is also hoped that by consulting the participants about the accuracy and relevance of the conclusions drawn, my interpretations will be challenged, my understanding advanced, and any oppressive effects of researcher involvement addressed.

The chapter will be organised within six sections:

- The first looks at the different ways in which the participants structured their narratives, in terms of making sense of the questions and constructing their responses.
- The second section introduces the concept of difference and its commonly employed uses, and I provisionally suggest where I stand in relation to the term.
- The third section goes on to look at identity, in terms of the ways in which an individual will experience both privilege and oppression, the tensions this causes and the role of passing in negotiating this.
- I then go on to examine the ways in which multiple vectors of social stratification intersect to create a web of oppressive social relations and the potential philosophical underpinning for such a system.
- The fifth section elaborates upon the ways in which vectors of power intersect, but examines this in more specific ways with a focus on race and gender, and disability and sexuality, looking at both the institutional level and the personal level.
- Finally, I will conclude by tentatively suggesting a way forward in terms of oppositional politics, and consider possible ways forward for the study.

The report is concluded with the mapping of the issues from the data and their connections, and the mapping of an overview of these, as a preliminary means of developing a reporting back format.

Where text appears in quotation marks this represents verbatim what the participants said, while apostrophes will indicate where I am paraphrasing from the transcripts. In direct quotations a / will indicate where I have skipped forward in the text, while ... will indicate the way pauses figured in the participant's speech. Where whole, or parts of quotations appear in italics in brackets, this indicates text added to the narratives by participants after transcription. All names used are pseudonyms, and place names have been made fictional to additionally safeguard anonymity. Participant names and their quotations have been colour coded to help the reader by creating threads through the report in order to follow specific voices.

### Ways of Structuring a Narrative.

While analysing the transcripts, it became clear that each participant had a model by which she structured her narrative. This was very interesting as it leant insight into the ways in which each person made meaning of their life and the world, and the connections between the two. It also suggested the different ways in which the participants made sense of their experiences. Catherine Kohler Reissman (1987) states that personal narratives are culturally based, and that an unfamiliarity with a particular method of story telling will severely impact upon a researcher's ability to understand what her participants are trying to communicate. She says

“This article shows how two women interviewees – one Anglo and one Hispanic – used different narrative genres to make meaning of the same event – marital separation... In the case of the working class, Hispanic woman, gender was apparently not enough to create the shared understandings necessary for a successful interview. The lack of shared norms about how a narrative should be organised, coupled with unfamiliar cultural themes in the content of the narrative itself, created barriers to understanding between the Anglo interviewer and the Puerto Rican narrator” (1987:173)

While I was from the same racial background as all the participants in the study, there may have been other cultural differences which could cause incongruence between our respective understanding of narrative forms and modes of expression. Therefore, this



perspective on what was said was highly relevant and it made me consider the ways in which I understood the accounts to be constructed.

Louise, Clare, Antonia and Joy all appeared to use the organisational mechanism of a catalytic event or process to structure their narrative, whereby a point within a life is given significance both in and of itself, *and* for its impact upon most, if not all other aspects of the narrative. These events/ processes seem to facilitate reflection, and both allow for and expedite change, and as such work as a means of making sense of experience.

Louise's narrative unfolded within the context of change while at university. Getting away from her home town, the scene of a "screwed up" childhood enabled her to escape harmful influences and achieve some distance (spatial and critical) from that, and to go through processes of recovery, calming down and development. University therefore acts as a pivotal structure by which Louise organises and explores concepts of place and stability, and experiments with new patterns of behaviour. However, there remains ambivalence toward these changes regarding the extent to which she feels them imposed rather than chosen, and anxiety about university ideology and where she stands regarding this. These tensions, contextualised as a geographic separation underpin the narrative and give it coherence.

Clare, similarly at university and anticipating the impending end of a period of stability, was facing a transition, which was unsettling and full of uncertainty. Fulltime education was coming to an end, signifying for her a passage into full adulthood and a move toward complete responsibility. Suddenly, past truths no longer fitted, resulting in the momentous experience of all her certainties being turned upside down. "Everything's in pieces." she said. She recognised that how things were put back together, and what shape they were constructed in could have far reaching implications for the future. The doubts she had about the direction she was pursuing and the alternatives available caused resistance to any form of decision making, yet the need to make her own choices was

clear. This temporary circling of the roundabout while considering the options for exit provided a structure by which to articulate anxieties and possibilities.

Antonia described the process of self-evaluation and reconstruction she initiated a few years ago, the results of which included separation and divorce from her husband, coming out as gay, and questioning within her family around issues of childhood abuse which went unchallenged at the time. She described having lived with feelings of being “closed in”, restricted by baggage which caused the impossibility, thus repression, of desires. This resulted in the feeling of being in a vacuum, where desires were pushed out and replaced with nothing. Coming out appears as the corner stone of the process, but it is acknowledged as part of the broader matter of self actualisation, self awareness and development which has had wide reaching implications for many aspects of her life. She acknowledged the fear involved with that process, but stressed the intensity of the need for autonomy and sense of self which was previously denied. This demarcation of before and after was used to structure the narrative in terms of articulating and making sense of the self.

Joy described a similar process of reflection, evaluation and reconstruction triggered by the deaths of both parents in close succession. The narrative analysed adult selfhood within the context of a “tragic childhood”, the interface between the two being the actions of her parents. This structured a reflection on past events, within which was the intense desire for understanding, and to an extent, healing and reconciliation.

These four narratives then, while structured differently, follow a discernible pattern in terms of the way experience is organised and understood. Neither Rebecca, Jackie nor Elise utilised this mechanism, and it is harder to pinpoint the means by which their narratives cohered. An interesting factor however, is that these three women, in the interview and to varying degrees in their lives are all ‘out’ lesbians, identifying under labels such as butch, dyke and gay. Within Jackie and Elise’s narratives, their sexuality as a fundamental organising principle in their lives came through and similarly organised their narratives. In this way they differed from Antonia, as they didn’t use the process of



coming out, but rather the more general quality of ‘outness’, that is, the experience of actively, day to day embodying the identity ‘lesbian’, to structure their narratives. This provided coherence in a different way, as it acted as a constant theme which dominated the nature of the participant’s responses, providing a particular frame on reality. Thus these two narratives were unifocal, while the others contained a series of frames through which reality was viewed.

I was therefore left with Rebecca’s narrative, and while she was out as a lesbian she did not appear to use her sexuality as a predominant organising lens through which to interact with the world, nor did she draw upon any event or process as structurally significant to her narrative. In terms of the research group she was something of an enigma. The only continuous strand within her narrative was the combative approach she appeared to take in her interactions with the world. Life appeared as a conflict within which there would always be allies and enemies. While this was a feature of the interactions she described, it was also an obvious tension having its share of advantages and disadvantages. The contradiction between her aggressive interactions and anti-violent sentiments created something of a pendulum motion around which the rest of the narrative hung.

### Difference.

‘Celebrating difference’ is a currently fashionable way of developing inclusivity in social life. However, in this section I intend to interrogate the term to consider to what extent it is a viable political concept for change. The writing will be organised under the following sub-headings:

- Recognising difference and inequality
- Difference as a political issue
- Models of difference.

## **Recognising difference and inequality.**

Having recruited a group of participants, and carried out interviews with them, the research now feels properly in full swing. No longer limited to reading books and articles, and synthesising that reading through writing. However, shifting the focus away from specifically lesbian sexuality, and focusing more on the general conditions of social inequality experienced in all forms, has lead me to question some of the assumptions upon which the study was based. While the common element within the group is that all the participants (and the researcher) are women, I became concerned that this commonality should not be over emphasised, as there would likely be a myriad of differences between us. As a group, women are probably as diverse as any other, with even the once guaranteed commonality of sex and gender being subject to Queer challenge. We are diverse and have as many differences as similarities. This then leads one to question to what extent it makes sense to talk of an 'us' or a 'we' or 'our'. Henrietta Moore recognises this in the introduction to her paper as she states,

“The use of ‘we’ is a highly politicised act both in anthropology and in feminist contexts. Its use here is intended to convey a sense of audience, that is of myself speaking to others. But, and much more importantly, it also operates as a mark of interrogation, a fictive unity that reveals the lines of fragmentation at the very moment when it claims affinity.”(1994:78)

The purpose of this chapter then, is to interrogate this 'we', in terms of coming to better understand the ways in which difference impacts upon a group, the implications of this for individual's and group identity, and the issues this raises for collective political action by marginalised groups.

For Louise the inscription of difference became visible at particular moments. She appeared to find it difficult to validate herself when she felt that nothing/ nobody else seemed to, except perhaps for a particularly close friend, who conspired in the ridicule of other friends' stereotypically gendered aspirations. From this alienation she seemed to find it hard to validate her well developed ability to cope. She said



“I think I’m quite, I used to be more obsessional but I’m still quite like, you know... paranoid about a lot of things... having to organise everything and be structured and not be able to... Now I just tend to finish the end of term on Friday and not tend to think about what I’m doing on Saturday and that is nice I’m much more free it’s freedom I’ve never had before, and I thought other people would be like that as well and they’re not, and I can’t you know, and I don’t know whether that makes me... I know you can’t say what’s normal but I don’t know whether that makes me more normal than them... you know!... where do you draw the... what’s the marker?”

Louise appeared to feel quite alienated, alone and ‘different’, being ostracised by norms which she could not relate to. This created a lot of ambivalence between valuing herself and being unsure of herself.

‘Difference’ is something which permeates all aspects of social life, but which in many ways is left as the hidden imperative of similarity as a means of creating political and social unities. In the light of Louise’s data, I was concerned that the ‘we’ which defined myself and my research participants must not become a cohesive force which erases differences to present a unanimous verdict on the research questions. Thus in my study I am interrogating the structures which invest identity with reductive powers, and instead am replacing it with a model of unique individuality, within which there will be constantly changing moments of identification and difference between group members. Thus differences will be acknowledged and represented, and multiple conflicting perspectives be allowed to be present simultaneously about the same subject. At the same time, ways of working collaboratively will be explored, with the aim of finding strategies which facilitate collaboration without differences being erased.

### **Difference as a political issue.**

‘Difference’ as a concept currently resonates within many marginal theories about identity, politics and representation. As a concept, it implicates a dominant referent against which ‘Other’ can be measured and defined, and from the margins this form of external definition is resisted in a struggle to validate self-created meanings. ‘Difference’ also perhaps signifies variety, which in a mundane existence is heralded as the spice of life. From the margins this often feels like being relegated to the status of diversion,

entertainment, or a form of politically correct tokenism. Thus, within ‘difference’ notions of hierarchy, privilege and power emerge, from which systems of stratification operate. This was evidenced by Elise, who experienced both cult status and oppression as a result of being out as a lesbian woman. She explained,

“My biggest problem at the moment was also my biggest fear before I returned to school—I got a homophobic roommate. I can’t live with someone who despises me, and I refuse to hide./ Since I have gotten here in August, she has let me know that it bothers her a great deal. Every chance available, she stresses the fact that she is straight (personally I don’t care). She has made side comments about the “gay and lesbian lifestyle”. I have also walked in on her while she was describing me as her faggot roommate.”

Thus ‘difference’ is not a concept which unproblematically protects or validates individuals. Often it can objectify and marginalise and be used to justify unequal social relations.

Within my study, all participants are viewed as individuals, while the internal differences within the group will be acknowledged and explored. This will aim to prevent a norm being established which certain participants will then be seen to deviate from, and instead create a system whereby participants’ individuality is recognised, and the diversity of that individuality acknowledged, without a hierarchy of difference being established. Thus we can begin to consider on what basis commonality can be achieved, without differences being erased. Such an approach was evidenced by Joy who alluded to the limitations of available labels and the stereotyping which goes along with them, and demonstrated the need to create one’s own. This was experienced particularly in the context of superficially appearing as a stereotypical wife and mum, while in reality “improvising” within these roles in unusual and creative ways. She said,

“actually in most ways I don’t conform, but I do use norms which I tend to improvise, i.e. I choose part time employment to be in a position to run things myself. I stay away from being on a management spine, I’m not lacking ambition but I’m wanting to be free to work with my husband to do it our way, and I’ll work like mad to find places to live and to be, to undercut commercialism/ The norm is taking care of my family, but to actively improvise what’s available/ I conform in the sense that I work, pay my bills to



the best of my ability, I don't conform in the sense that I respect improvisation and see it as an active tool of life."

Thus alternative ways of being and understanding can be articulated, and it is this potential which the study aims to harness. However, norms can be particularly enduring and resist any form of adaptation, and Joy reported conflicts arising where other's stereotyping of her would interfere with this improvisation, and that she struggled with such identifications.

A central debate linking the data to the literature then is whether socially marginalised groups should seek equality with the mainstream, playing down difference, or challenge the assumptions upon which the notion of centre and margins is based, thus asserting difference as a facet of all social life, not exclusive to marginalised groups. An example of the former is given by Rakesh Ratti as he outlines some of the tensions for South Asian gay men living in North America. He states,

"I have often encountered reactions ranging from mild discomfort to outright disapproval from some South Asian gay males on the issue of androgyny. Many of us are so intent on integrating into the gay mainstream of America that we forget it's not perfect, that much more is possible than is now available. To seek out more, be it through androgynous clothes, styles, attitudes, or sociopolitical beliefs, is to court the disapproval of our own gay mainstream, which is trying so hard to prove that it is "no different" than the heterosexual mainstream." (1993:52)

This attempt to prove oneself 'no different' hinges on the notion that if one was to instead *proclaim* and own one's difference, this would automatically relegate one to a justifiably lower social position. In the lesbian community Jackie described pressure to conform to different appearance stereotypes than in mainstream society, but which she found equally repressive. Claiming to be 'no different' may also lead to assumed homogeny, as difference as a concept is played down. Jackie said she liked to mix norms from the two cultures to create an image she felt comfortable with, but she explained that she got sick of people assuming or insisting that she must be straight because of her appearance. She said

“see what I like is I like to have my make-up on... emm... but then I quite like to wear... what I would class as maybe a bit dykey-looking stuff... I quite like that, make-up on, dykey stuff, Doc Martens on/ and I think that’s quite nice... but then I do like to wear dresses as well... mind you I have... (laughs) I’ve wore dresses and gone to Planet X [gay club] and... “you’re straight are you?” “you must be straight”... and that really irritated me, I mean it’s not an absolute rule that you have to wear trousers all the time... emm, and I got so fed up with that, people saying ‘you’re straight’ or ‘you must be straight’... that I started wearing jeans and checky shirts for quite a while.”

This raises issues about the socially constructed and enforced parameters of authenticity and homogeneity for an identity such as lesbian, and questions why it is important sometimes to be identified as belonging. It also indicates the extra-sexual aspects of the identity. In this case, the non-conformity of wearing a dress in a gay club is interpreted as passing as straight, whereas in actual fact it challenges lesbian appearance stereotypes and expectations.

An alternative politics is to *emphasise* difference to challenge the system which creates and sustains the notions of margins and centre and the attendant system of unequal social privilege. This process involves challenging the construction of social categories as monolithic, by revealing differences within these categories to disrupt the assumptions on which they are based. This involves undermining social identities organised around race, sexuality, disability and gender for instance by revealing the differences within them and therefore the constructed nature of their parameters. Writing about disabled lesbians, Joanne Doucette states,

“We are seen, and see ourselves, as different, as outsiders- outside the mainstream, rejected by the disabled community, excluded by the lesbian world. We have no community of our own. We are different.”(1989:17)

Deconstructing social identities is, of course, extremely destabilising as the foundations of Enlightenment thinking are challenged, thus it is often seen as too radical a strategy by groups only recently enfranchised, and thus just getting used to subjectivity after a long history of being externally objectified. In the context of disability identity, Shakespeare states,



“Some have asked why they should deconstruct their own identities when the oppressors identities are still so strong...”(1996:107)

This is because, once a category or identity has been deconstructed out of all usefulness, it is uncertain upon what basis individuals will collaborate in group politics, once the point of their previous association has been obliterated.

When it is not clear that deconstructing identities will also end social oppression, the potential for future political activism remains crucial. Therefore, one of the risks of such a strategy is that it will be surreptitiously welcomed as a means by which marginal opponents will make themselves politically ineffectual (Yeatman:1994; Strickland:1994). However, I believe that this is perhaps being slightly over-cautious, and personally I would like to see what the effects of deconstructing social identities would be. It seems unlikely that the category ‘woman’ could be deconstructed out of existence without ‘men’ going too. Whether the dissolution of categories around which social inequality has been based will end that inequality would remain to be seen. For my study then, the refusal to reduce a diverse group of women down to an assumed concept of commonality, will also seek to question to what extent commonality legitimately exists, and to test the stability of the social category ‘woman’.

Furthermore, an additional understanding of where and how axes of social stratification intersect and inter-react would allow a more sophisticated picture to develop in terms of the internal diversity of groups. Clare’s data encapsulated this issue. She explained feeling that her working class background alienated her from the *locally* understood stereotype of the privileges enjoyed by the ‘typical student’, and felt disempowered by the attitudes of these more privileged students who she perceived more adequately fit the image. However, she acknowledged using the glamorous aspects of student life to masquerade behind in order to create an image for those who would not know any better, while also negotiating the perceived privileges of student life in settings more closely linked to her roots. She says

“it might be an ego thing as well... with me anyway! Where emm... like I might want to go out one night and give the impression that ‘oh I’m at university, I’m jetting off, I’m doing this and’ its all very easy, but they don’t know deep down that, you might be up here one weekend and it might be the,

a very very lonely weekend.../ but you'd... not let them think that would you/ I definitely do that... particularly to those who wouldn't have an idea what university was, had never been, yet... if someone had then... I, then you might talk about those lonely times or/ or all those people there who you don't get along with... like we have the 'raahs'/ who are all hoighty toighty/ it can be quite lonesome when you see all those, with their mobile phones on going round"

In this way she both uses and rejects stereotypes at different times depending on what she hopes to achieve, minimising and maximising notions of difference. This situation is theorised by Sherry Gorelick, who critiqued Barrett's models of difference (1987) within a research project conducted by Judith Rollins. The research focused on female domestics and their female employers. Gorelick states,

"To understand both the domestics and their employers, therefore, and for them to understand themselves, Rollins needed both perspectives, but they were not equal. The maids' perspective had primacy. Consistent with the insights of all the feminist methodologists, *theirs* is the view from below. This idea goes beyond "different perspectives" and "difference" to the nature of oppression as a multifaceted structure of unequal social relations" (1991:471). (underlined emphasis is mine)

Thus 'difference' is fluid as one's position within unequal social relations changes due to location and discourse. While the concept of difference, and its attendant notions of dominant referent and 'other' position, are not to be ignored, what I am really keen to understand is the working and organisation of this 'multifaceted structure of unequal social relations'. This seemed particularly pertinent in the light of Clare's data which suggested a high degree of ambivalence towards the experience of both privilege and oppression.

### Identity.

To understand 'difference' as a constructed concept of social inequality, it is necessary to consider the ways in which social identities are constructed, and the ways in which these are positioned in relation to the Western model of binary thought. This section will be organised under the sub-headings of

- Social construction of identities



- Privilege and oppression
- Passing.

### **The social construction of identities.**

To begin to apply all this to the complex web of identity, I believed the best place to start was with the self. I drafted a piece of publicity inviting people to participate in my research project, on which I described myself as a ‘lesbian woman artist’. While redrafting the advert I began to consider the instability of the three categories I had identified under. I realised that due to my heterosexual past some people, particularly those dominant on the local lesbian scene, would contest my right to assume the label ‘lesbian’, questioning my authenticity within that role. Instead they would probably relegate me to the much less privileged category of bisexual. Furthermore, I doubted my own right to occupy the category ‘artist’, as my recent creative visual output had been remarkably unstartling to say the least, and ‘real’ artists would perhaps question the validity of my applying the label to my level of creative activities. They appear to come under what Lubaina Himid describes as ‘cranky’ (1990). Finally, and the category I felt most secure on out of the three, I realised that on the streets (at the time of writing in May 1998), probably one third to a half of all people passing me had to look twice to be able to categorically assign me a gender, and that not all of them would necessarily decide upon “female”. Now redrafting in September, with longer hair, a self-consciously less-‘butch’ attitude, and occasionally some make-up, this scrutinising attention is less obvious. According to Jacob Hale’s (rather dubious) set of criteria (1996), six months hair growth and an altered attitude holds a key to membership of the category ‘woman’, as in May I failed to qualify as a woman on about half of the clauses, including “...Achieving and maintaining a physical gender self-presentation... Behaving in ways... [and] ...Giving textual cues that work together to produce the gender assignment “woman”...”(1996:109-111). Therefore, my changed appearance perhaps located me more convincingly in the category ‘woman’, but ironically potentially helped to fuel speculation around my right to occupy a lesbian identity.

What my experiences and these criteria in fact revealed, was the constructedness of the category “woman”, and suggest that I failed to conform to the **dominant** construction in multiple ways. In fact, my experiences revealed the constructedness of all categories, and pointed to the hierarchisation of people within them on some notion of ‘authenticity’. Jackie expressed dissatisfaction at the ways in which gender *roles* were assigned by appearance in the lesbian community, and the ways in which they were expected to be played out in same sex relationships. Following on from her observations about dress code, she stated that if one persists in wearing dresses or skirts while claiming a lesbian identity, an assumption of passivity and stereotypical femininity is imposed, while ‘butch’ women will assume stereotypically masculine roles in relation. She said

“all my dykey friends wear trousers all the time actually... I think... I don’t think they ever wear skirts, but I do like skirts... and I do like dresses... I like short skirts... with your err... Doctor Martens on, I think it looks quite nice... and I, but for some people that’s weird, you know, ‘no you can’t ~~be~~ if you’re wearing a skirt or a dress’... or, the other thing that they do, is assume you’re a total femme... this femme butch business... ‘oh, you know, you must be very femme, very passive and all this’, and I think ‘god, *no*’... it’s such a load of rubbish, it’s crap... I hate that attitude as well that annoys me that/ yes, and “I’ll get you a drink”... and at any moment they’re just going to pat you on the head... ‘*don’t, please, it’s really* irritating!’... just because you wear a dress and err mascara doesn’t mean to say you’re a passive little, fluttery eyelashy femme, *oohhh* I can’t handle that, I don’t like it at all... it’s awful”

This experience also alluded to a politics of labelling, within which the power to define is contested, rules of inclusion are created and membership is conferred or revoked.

I find the idea of there being insufficient labels available to accurately define one’s experience very resonant, and this has been supported by participants’ data, while I have found parallels in the work of black lesbian writers Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta who grapple with the term ‘mixed race’.

“The term mixed race, while an improvement on half-caste, is still regarded as an inexact shorthand for being born of one White and one Black parent. Not all of us who are racially ‘mixed’ conform to this model. The term mixed racial parentage has possibilities, but still defines us on the basis of the racial background of our parents, ignoring the fact that for some of us the racial ‘mix’ occurred further back than this.”(1993:36)



Thus the absence of adequate concepts to understand the reality of one's life, for instance as a feminine, assertive lesbian woman, puts restrictions on oneself through others' need then to stereotype.

While labels might be viewed as restrictive, the existence or creation of appropriate and accurate identities can also be validating for those who have been excluded from structures of social life through their invisibility. Having a recognised identity can create a presence, and presence may facilitate participation. Antonia described how she challenged people's expectations and assumptions at work by coming out, forcing them to reconsider and alter their perspectives of her. This was a particularly strong statement after having previously been married for twenty years. She said

“when I did come out as gay, that was one of the good things about it... / is that people had to erm... .. adapt, you know, what they thought about me, they had to change their perspective about it, so it made them think about me in a new way, their expectations changed, but when I came out as gay I did a lot of other things at the same time as well, one, my marriage... ended, and I started a gay relationship, I also emm, did some... .. work on myself to do with abuse that had happened in the past, I challenged my family on *that* as well, at the same time, erm... it wasn't anything too heavy, but it was just something that had bugged me, and it was just something that I... part of being closed in, and not being open about being... well I'll say bisexual, I don't know, gay, whatever, having a different sexuality to the one they expected me to have, erm... it gave me the courage to challenge other expectations, and things that people put on me, and that was one of them ...”

Thus finding an identity facilitated Antonia in asserting herself, while she simultaneously worked to move beyond labels and to 'be' in ways which defied definition. The tensions around labels and identities were also explored by Elise, and she reported placing a great deal of value on having a label to accurately describe her experience, while her identity of choice was 'butch (lesbian)'. She described the intense resonance with the term butch when she first heard it, and believed that this, as the character of her sexuality, was more socially problematic than the nature of the sexuality itself. Being committed to being totally out about her sexuality, the label obviously facilitated that. She reported other lesbians' anxiety at her being so open, fearing it would implicate them and disrupt the

efficiency of their partial passing. It appeared at times that this passing felt unacceptable to Elise, as she was expected to compromise her own values in order to protect it. She wrote

“It took half a bottle of tequila after a rugby match to learn that I am the only completely out lesbian on the team. Others are out to some degree. During the course of a drunken conversation with a fellow rugger, who happens to be bisexual, I found out from her that my openness and outness puts the other lesbians on the team in an awkward position. If people know about me, then they might suspect them. Guilt by association is what it boils down to. I feel at odds in response to the actions of others. I tend to project it inward and destroy myself in the process.”

Having the way one chooses to express one's sexuality criticised by others who identify under the same label but differently, can be a very destabilising process. This further highlighted the instability of the categories and the labels themselves, but also the individual need to sometimes experience congruence with the experiences of others.

### **Privilege and oppression.**

While problematising my own identities started a whole thought process going, at the time I had no alternative language or concepts to describe myself, or organise my experience around. Therefore I still identify my experience as ‘woman’ and ‘lesbian’ (or more usually ‘dyke’... I have ditched the term ‘artist’!), and I have simultaneously come to realise that there are no other categories which I am constantly aware of which I consciously organise my experience around. In certain situations my occupation, class or religious upbringing may emerge into relevance, but these quickly recede again once the situation is passed. It has been through reading around Black Feminist thought and also in Disability Studies, that I have come to realise that not being constantly conscious of one's race is a privilege of being white in a racist society (hooks:1995), and being generally unaware of and non-disabled by one's impairments is a result of living in a society which disables some and not others depending on the social meaning attributed to particular impairments (Shakespeare:1993). Helen (charles) states,



“Being white seems to be nice and simple ... For example, ‘whiteness’ is still not being widely seen in this country, northern Europe, or North America as an ethnicity, as a colour, as pertaining to anything to do with ‘race’. Why? ...I have often wondered whether white people *know* that they are white... And if they do, is it only when their notion of the ‘other’ as ‘non-white’ is placed before them? Is it only when the binary opposition of white and ‘black’ or ‘Asian’ is within their field of vision? And can they only speak for themselves from the borrowed position of who they construe as ‘other’?” (1993:99)

I could (and perhaps should) therefore describe myself as white, a woman, of Roman Catholic upbringing, lesbian, non-disabled with unknown HIV status, (problematically) middle class, under 30 years of age. Of course, the list could go on. Thus while the ‘lesbian’, and ‘woman’ aspects of my self contribute to the social oppression I experience, being able to be generally unaware of my race, age and non-disabled status signify privilege which others in society do not have. Daniels states,

“Through the course of my daily life, I do not encounter racial hostility or overt threats of homophobic violence or more than the usual amount of gender oppression; instead, I can often coast on the privileges of middle-class whiteness and the presumption of heterosexuality.”(1997:xiv)

I furthermore have become increasingly aware that identifying and becoming politicised around one’s *own* oppression can act as a means of ignoring the oppression of others, in which I myself may collude. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (1981) argue that we are afraid to admit that while experiencing oppression, we are also privileged in comparison to others, that while we have been oppressed we have also been oppressors.

The failure, or refusal to accept one’s own privilege is evident in some Feminist writing. While it is clearly acceptable and politically effective to expose oppression and to demand perpetrators to take responsibility, this is harder to accept if those demanding it set themselves up as beyond and incapable of oppressive action. The strategy of labelling people as ‘privileged’, as if individuals can be characterised unproblematically as oppressed *or* advantaged, enables a ‘them and us’, ‘good Vs evil’ dichotomy to be set up, whereby some position themselves on the ‘good’ oppressed side, and therefore avoid having to confront the ways in which they themselves are privileged. This is a result of

working *within* binary categories to re-value the traditionally devalued side, as this then makes acknowledging the oppressive behaviour of lesbians, women or disabled people, for example, problematic. Perhaps accepting one's own privilege, while also being oppressed, is a much more difficult thing to do than it first appears while still maintaining credibility in one's own struggle for greater social inclusion. Accepting one's comparative level of social power is potentially the first step. However, breaking down the dichotomy which positions women as *either* privileged *or* oppressed, would potentially help. In her interview Elise wrote

“What does it mean to be a butch lesbian? I feel an overwhelming sense of pride swelling up when I think about that question. I think that there is a certain honor in being butch. Some mystical power that lets me be a woman but have the freedom of a man. I feel confident and liberated from society. (Okay, so hand me a cape and call me Super Dyke.) I am respected and hated at the same time, but I have learned that under the sheet I am most wanted for being butch.

It can also be a burden. I am often expected to be the dominant person in the relationship most of the time. That can get tiring. I prefer equal relationships; however I do seem to set myself up for that position of dominance. I like to have control of my life, and sometimes that can run into my partner's.

...I would never and have never hit a lover or hurt a partner. It's quite the opposite. Despite the fact that I am usually taller and stronger, I have had two abusive relationships.”

This is important as it begins to implicate us in the ways in which we can experience privilege and oppression to varying degrees at different times, and the fluidity of these concepts. This is pertinent to my position as a researcher as this carries with it a degree of power and privilege, which if not deconstructed and addressed can replicate the structures of social inequality in the research process, which the study itself seeks to examine and address.

Writers such as Sarah Lucia Hoagland, accept that lesbians are capable of oppressing each other and other women, but puts the responsibility for this firmly on men and patriarchy. She states,



“In addition, we carried deep within us the values of the fathers, including classism, racism, ageism, anti-Semitism, sizeism, ablebodyism, and imperialism, as well as sexism and heterosexism- all of which informed our perceptions and none of which we immediately, nor have we yet, divested ourselves of.”(1988:531) (underlined emphasis mine)

This devolution of responsibility away from women is unhelpful in the struggle to assert women’s active subjectivity. Perhaps we have to recognise that in achieving this, we accept the potential for negative action as well as positive, and firmly take responsibility for this. Jackie remembered being surprised when she encountered racism in the gay community. She said,

“The other thing which I felt I must admit, oh god I was somewhat naïve, I assumed because gay people did experience intolerance that they would be very tolerant, very open-minded and they wouldn’t be racist, so it come as a shock to actually be talking away to someone and they’d come out with very racist comments.”

If personal responsibility is not taken for this, this will severely undermine the struggle for equality of social inclusion and participation. However, Sherry Gorelick (1991) strongly emphasises the hidden nature of oppression, claiming that some positions of privilege will actually provide a vantage point which actively *erases* the appearance of oppressive relations. Privilege, she argues, is about being able to be ignorant of it.

### **Passing.**

It is reality then for perhaps all of us, to experience simultaneously various degrees of both privilege through implication in one category, and oppression through implication in another, and this was sustained by the participants’ data. ‘Passing’ involves allowing false assumptions about oneself to go unchallenged, when this assumes one to have a more socially privileged identity than one does. Passing may also signify actively constructing a false impression to give rise to wrong assumptions. Therefore people may pass as white, straight, non-disabled, middle class, hearing, Christian, young, male etc... as these are some of the dominant frames of reference for according privilege in our

mainstream society. However, in the gay community, someone may pass as lesbian for instance, as this would accord greater status than straight or bisexual. In her interview, Jackie said that she adjusted the physical expression of her sexuality depending on the context she was in, using this to her advantage depending on what she hoped to achieve. In many cases this will just involve guaranteeing mere physical safety from homophobic attacks. She was clear about the degree to which she was prepared to 'pass' in that she would be explicit about her disinterest in men, but not elaborate any further. Rebecca meanwhile accepted that she was conscious of her sexuality when going for a job, having decided that she wouldn't come out at interview, but wouldn't deliberately try to pass either. She was concerned over how her sexuality would be handled at work, and wary of social discrimination around sexuality. However, Rebecca was also aware of the ways in which others would stereotype her, and the impact of this on her interactions with others. She said

“well normally when I meet people the first assumption is that I'm going to be aggressive and I'm going to intimidate them in some way and I'm like 'no, sorry if I have', and I've got a group of friends who, when I first met them I ended up staying at one of their houses, and I ended up sleeping in a rocking chair because there was nowhere else to sleep, I wasn't going to sleep on the floor so I slept in this rocking chair... emm... until they actually got to know me they thought I was a complete psycho, 'she slept in a rocking chair, oh my god', 'what!?'”

Thus acquaintances appear to expect Rebecca to seek out trouble, and this has a significant effect in mediating interactions.

In some cases, passing will not be about reducing oppression or securing privilege, but will involve bringing out what is felt to be the true identity inside. For instance a person with a male to female transgender will 'pass' as female regardless of this being a generally less socially privileged identity than 'male'. However 'passing' as a member of a more privileged group is something which causes tensions and resentment. The **ability** to 'pass' as a member of a more privileged group while in actual fact being an outsider, provides a strategy of avoiding oppression, but for those **unable** to pass this may be viewed as a privilege unavailable to them. Furthermore this may also be viewed as a 'cop out' by those able but unwilling to pass. Reasons for passing are numerous and may



include needing or wanting respite from the discrimination one might face; suspecting that one's marginalised identity might restrict access into new arenas such as employment; wanting to establish relationships without the identity being a factor; and wanting to play with social rules and expectations. Joy reported being in a process of coming to terms with her parents' deaths, which involved a reflection upon their lives and the impact upon herself, both as a child and as an adult. The importance of **self defined interpretations** seemed paramount leading from experiences of being misrepresented (deliberately, or through misunderstanding/ projection) in the past. Thus the opportunity to become present in her actual state, rather than as a hologram from other people's minds was predominant, and she reported previously having hidden the past in order to reveal the present. She said

“in the past I hid my past, I wanted to be recognised as me, to the extent that when colleagues found out my background they were very surprised, even flabbergasted / My repression stemmed from my mother's jealousy of me *and* my father and my mother's inability to stick up for me. I have been afraid of jealousy, arrogance and coldness, and so, I would hide parts of my life to protect myself and others/ recently I've had to make an effort to make myself known. Erm, my parents had misrepresented me, I think they were left with a, more a picture of themselves, err than a picture of me, so, when my parents died, and I got to know the rest of my family on both sides again, I've found that these people have become incredibly supportive of me...”

The positive responses of others here were reported as being very important. However, emerging from current processes of reflection seemed to be the need to now begin to acknowledge the past on her own terms, to understand, assimilate and heal. This highlighted the oftentimes complexity of the issues around passing and coming out. Thus while those who cannot pass may view those who can as privileged, and those who choose not to pass may often berate those who do for buying into the privilege of the dominant group, passing is not often an option gladly chosen. For many it is a return to the closet, a denial of a part of the self, and often feels like an enforced decision, rather than a free choice. Evelyn Torton Beck states,

“We are told that white-skinned Jews can always pass. Why is the possibility of “passing” so insistently viewed as a great privilege open to Jews, and not understood as a terrible degradation and denial?”(1982:xxiv).

Two people interviewed by Tom Shakespeare (1996) in research about disability and sexuality suggested that the visibility of their disability, and the invisibility of their homosexuality meant that the choice to pass as straight was available, while the choice to pass as non-disabled was not. Other participants discussed the perceived need to conceal impairment in order to be allowed access to the gay scene. Thus the dynamics around ‘passing’ are complex and are often fraught with guilt, blame and recrimination.

While passing may be viewed as a privilege by those unable to do it, having the choice to come out may similarly be viewed as a freedom unavailable to some. Being able to (publicly) identify within a socially marginalised category, such as lesbian, disabled and Jewish may be a result of being favourably positioned along other lines of social stratification. The level of a person’s social marginalisation may very well prevent their making public yet another marginal and socially hated identity. Elizabeth Hammonds states,

“The hypervisibility of black women academics means that visibility too can be used to control the intellectual issues that black women can and cannot speak about. Already threatened with being sexualised and rendered inauthentic as knowledge producers in the academy by students and colleagues alike, this avoidance of theorising about sexuality can be read as one contemporary manifestation of their structured silence.”(1994:135)

Thus depending on one’s circumstances, whether being forced out of the closet, or forced to stay in, the lack of freedom to **choose** is a significant factor within social inequality. Thus when others judge one’s actions in regard to this it can be experienced as very oppressive.

One facet of passing as a forced or chosen strategy is its role within assimilation into the mainstream. Thus an identity is reduced to the model of the majority and is rewarded with tolerance rather than acceptance, which amounts to a condescending willingness to ignore the difference as long as it remains hidden. However, even if one



does assimilate and tolerance is the reward, this can be revoked without warning. Torton Beck states,

“Even those Jews who considered themselves more German than Jewish were annihilated by the Nazis. Ironically, when Jews have succeeded in integrating into a society, it has been used against them... The great American dream, “from rags to riches”, is simply not acceptable for Jews, whose success is somehow always tainted.”(1982:xxii)

Thus there are contested elements of both privilege and oppression within the practice of passing which are not easily resolved. Central to Joy’s narrative was the need to have some control over the meanings taken from it, and she traced this back to traumatic misrepresentations which had been made of her in the past. She introduced the importance of reflection and reconstruction in ‘coming out’ about a tragic childhood, and described herself as feeling trapped within feelings of guilt and responsibility for her parents. Joy suggested that through public exploration, she may be able to both explore these for herself, and challenge the expectations and stereotypes which are constructed by the term ‘abuse’. She said

“I’m cautiously coming out about a tragic childhood, age has helped me look back to see what really happened in context. I may break the taboo by writing a book. I will need time alone to formulate ideas. I’d want to challenge expectations and stereotypes, to break the mould for everyone, not just for me...”

Owning this process and the experiences and feelings it will reveal is clearly very important. However, this again points to the reality that individuals are multiply socially positioned and that oppression is a relative and multifaceted force which intersects lives in manifold ways, making passing and coming out complex and fluid terms which intersect individual lives in multifarious ways.

## Social Stratification.

Understanding the structure of oppression at an institutional level is important in terms of reconstructing ‘difference’ as an institutional force rather than an individual responsibility. This reveals the ways in which extremist discourses permeate mainstream thinking and reveals parallels between apparently distinct axes of stratification. This section will be organised under the sub-headings of:

- The structured inscription of difference
- The inscription of inequality within Western thought.

### The structured inscription of difference.

Many of the participants described the ways in which their lives were, or had been limited and defined by the assumptions of others. While she was prepared to be increasingly open about herself with those to whom she grew particularly close, Louise was reluctant to share her personal life with anyone, and was self-conscious about its complexity compared to the perceived triviality of others’. Others had been shocked in the past when she had been honest about her previous experiences, and she remained very guarded against these reactions. She said

“in the past when I have been more honest with people and told them, like if they said to me, like err, if I’ve been feeling unwell and had a bad time of it, and they asked me why, and I told them, they’ve been shocked and I’ve told them things that didn’t shock them, and people don’t tend to be able to cope with it very well, they don’t know what to say and they don’t know how to react, and so they don’t really know what... they can’t relate to it themselves, and so they tend to be... either treat it with a sort of sense of humour, you know which is understandable if you don’t... you know I can sort of see why people would be like that, but also... its just the fact that people don’t tend to be very open minded and tolerant of other people.”

This was connected with a desire to protect others from the intensity of her ‘stuff’. She reported being careful not to “spew it all out” immediately, but to negotiate a close relationship of trust before making any disclosure. Antonia reports having previously



hidden parts of herself from herself, while others have wanted a parody of her rather than the real thing. The process of evaluation and change she went through, part of which was coming out, signified a period of intense rejection of others' expectations. She reports previously being governed by other people's expectancies, feeling like a chameleon, providing whatever was required and suppressing the self. However, a major shift in attitude ensued, resulting in defying the people who wanted her to be a phoney, an awareness of the importance of having an identity of her own making, and being aware of and acknowledging "every aspect" of herself. She says

"as I say I feel as if I've lived two lives, two lives in a way, the time before I came out as gay, and the time after, and there is a discrepancy between the two, erm... before I came out as gay I don't feel that I really accepted myself for who I was, and I didn't accept huge chunks of who I was, and consequently, I played roles, because of that, because I didn't really know who I really was, and so I conformed to society's expectations of me as a woman... erm... so I didn't really do a lot of challenging, and I did quite a lot of conforming erm..."

This changed the way Antonia related to people, putting her own needs first, and working toward being true to herself everywhere.

To get to grips with the ways in which the participants may experience degrees of inclusion and exclusion then, it is important to develop some understanding about the ways in which oppressive power relations affect individual lives. Jesse Daniels (1997) in a book about the configuration of race, gender, class and sexuality in white supremacist discourse, argues that while race is central to the discourse, the construction of a racialised nation is sustained by the equally repressive constructions of class, sexuality and gender. She states,

"...within the white supremacist imagination- as it is expressed in extremist movement discourse, or as it is institutionalised- race, class, gender and sexuality are woven together in complex, and mutually reinforcing ways."(1997:23)

Thus white, heterosexual, non-disabled Christian males form the cornerstone of the 'Nation' according to this discourse, and all 'others' are constructed in relation to this

position. Within this system of classification, Jewish people are categorised as non white, and notions of class are explicitly racialised: non-whites who are rich are either ‘money-grubbing Jews’, pimps or pushers, while those who are poor are branded ‘welfare queens’ living off the system (a concept which is also explicitly gendered). The meanings constructed around similarly classed white people meanwhile are ‘doing well in spite of...’ or ‘claiming benefit because of...’ the actions of nonwhites.

In her interview, Clare highlighted the interconnectedness of systems of stratification as she described a process of separation from her parents, where she began to question her previous assumption of their wisdom, and perceive their weaknesses. She had previously experienced both conformity and rebellion in relation to parental expectations, and when younger she reports that she probably ‘followed her heart more’. However, in regard to higher education she allowed herself to be steered toward “the safe option” based on her father’s advice, to which she then sacrificed her “one true passion”, which is art. She described this as having “crucified” her. Clarenow has a set of doubts, questions and regrets about the direction she has taken, and wonders if she should maybe have trusted her instincts more like when she was younger. Having abdicated responsibility when choosing a degree course, Clare now seemed to find it difficult to take her own concerns about it seriously, thus failing to validate her own feelings and intuition. These experiences were linked closely to people’s gendered expectations of Clare, and often related to class assumptions and her experiences of social exclusion.

What it is important to realise is that while it is extremist groups who use the categories of race, gender, sexuality and class so explicitly in their politics, they are also socially constructed, sustained and contested in mainstream politics, the media and through the daily living in Western societies. Daniels states,

“...I contend that the widespread appearance of many white supremacist motifs in popular culture, with many of the connections between race, class, gender and sexuality laid out here still intact, suggests that such themes resonate effectively beyond the audience of avowed white supremacists.”  
(1997:135)

Thus while it may be the disruption to binary thinking brought on by the challenges of Postmodernism which have prompted a resurgence in white supremacist group



membership, most activists speaking with allegedly newly enfranchised voices will testify to the resilience in the popular imagination of the concepts being challenged.

### **The inscription of inequality within Western thought.**

While race, gender, class and sexuality, along with other 'differences' are clearly interrelated in terms of structures of oppression, it is important to see them as both separate and related. However, it is important to recognise the overarching institutional production of these differences as one centralised process to ensure, as Biddy Martin (1988) states, that responsibility is seen as collective rather than merely individual. Discussing the erasure of difference within Feminism Martin states,

“...differences, for example, of race, class or sexuality, are finally rendered noncontradictory by virtue of their (re)presentation as differences between individuals, reducible to questions of identity within the unifying context of feminism. What remains unexamined are the systematic institutional relationships between those differences, relationships that exceed the boundaries of the lesbian community, the women's movement, or particular individuals, and in which apparently bounded communities and individuals are deeply implicated.”(1988:78) (underlined emphasis mine)

The institutional level of difference, by which I mean the extent to which social stratification is created and sustained through social mechanisms such as the family, education, the law etc..., *must* be recognised, as it both implicates 'mainstream' politics in oppression (preventing, for instance, racism being explained as a purely extremist phenomenon) and disallows difference from being viewed only in individual terms, with the state taking no responsibility for the social stratification attached to 'differences'.

Tom Shakespeare draws parallels between the experiences of women under patriarchy, and people with an impairment in a disabling society. He discusses marginality as being “...defined in relation to...” the dominant signifier in a binary relationship.(1993:291) He states,

“The statement that women are other, generalised rather than as individuals, is the conclusion of a line of reasoning which starts with the observation that the masculine has been presented as the absolute human type.”(1993:291)

In considering the binary relationships which exist to culturally structure our understanding of, and valuation within sex, gender, race, sexuality etc...one side of the equation is always and only the dominant one, and one's positioning within these relationships begins to explain the ways in which privilege and oppression co-exist within each individual reality. The construction of subjectivity around binary categories is what Michel Foucault describes as “dividing practices” which function as an effect of power in order to create the individual as a subject (Foucault:1984; Deveaux:1994). My perception of binary relations is that they are sustained to conceal the actual *non-existence* of discrete categories into which people can be unproblematically placed. A further project of this concealment I contend, is the crossing between the *supposedly opposed* categories which the binary represents. Often, such crossing, as with people identifying as bisexual, transvestite or transgendered, is viewed as more anomalous than those accepting of their positioning as ‘other’ in the binary relationship, and this censure occurs from both sides of the binary. This was evidenced by Antonia in her interview as she described the effects of labelling across the whole of her life as very limiting.

Antonia reported feeling that labels masked the roles they described, while their dominant definitions restricted and harnessed people, especially in the gay community. She asserted that roles and stereotypes were used to make sense of individuality and difference, while they were also about power, hierarchy and control, and about the politics of what is and isn't sanctioned. Having been married for twenty years, going through a divorce, coming out as gay and re-evaluating her married relationship, neither gay, straight, nor bisexual fitted for Antonia in a straightforward way. Antonia was aware of lesbian hostility to bisexual women, and found this both upsetting and irritating. It also contributed to finding ‘bisexual’ a problematic identity to embrace. She said

“bisexuals are *not*... erm... very accepted by lesbian women... lesbian women do seem to have quite a few reservations about people that are bi/ I think I've always been bi, I think I could go either way, I think that when I was married I chose to be heterosexual, and I think now that I'm single again, I'm choosing



to be erm gay, and so I think it's definitely a choice for me... erm... ... people tell me that other gay people don't like this, they just do *not* like bisexuals because they don't fit in anywhere, they're neither one thing nor the other, and feminist gay women just, you know, if you've been with a guy in some respects, then you're definitely persona non grata, which is *really weird*, I just, I, people's concept of sexuality, well, just isn't mine, is upsetting"

She was aware of the wider political context, and understood the tensions for marginalised groups, but felt that petty personal details took on political significance, while identities and definitions became more about these details than anything intrinsic or central. This led to the imposed obligation of conformity, and for Antonia, the threat of being closed in and restricted again. While she reported being worried about rejection by the gay community, she reported worrying more about the loss of her newly developed autonomy, and thus refused to conform.

### Intersection.

At this stage then, it is important to look at the complex intersection of power relations in three ways;

- firstly, the participants' experiences of class and gender
- secondly the ways in which institutionalised oppression relies on and utilises the range of systems of social stratification to create a complex nexus of power relations, protected from unilateral challenges
- and thirdly, the ways in which individuals experience living within and across a range of differently privileged or marginalised categories, and the specific realities they encounter in doing so.

### Class and gender.

Some of the participants shared a discomfort around issues of class and often these would be tied in with gender assumptions. Antonia said,

"I have lived in lots of different places, as well, so I sort of grew up in the north of England, in the mill towns/ but I mean, we had a heavy tradition of

women working, I mean my grandparents worked, my grandmothers worked/ my own mother worked erm as well, and the women that I knew worked, and then of course I went into the Air Force, all women working there, so I never really, and it wasn't until erm, after I got married, I moved down, lived in Donwell for a while and then I moved into Mirthshire, and when I lived in Mirthshire it was like a culture shock, because women did *not* work in Mirthshire, women stayed at home in Mirthshire."

Clare explored these issues in relation to her continuing education at university, and her holiday job on the checkout at a local supermarket. She said

"we have this student system though so I have got a bond with... I'd say, six, eight girls, no they're not all girls actually, some are lads... there's no lads on the checkout so, I don't think... not who are at university no... right so we have this student system where we come back in the holidays and work for them, when other staff are off on holiday, so I have a bond with them, but I do have... yeah it's hard, they don't know who, they see you with someone, and you can see them looking and... they're not looking at you they're looking at, someone who's at university, and you feel like... it makes you feel like... they think you're better than you are... but I'm just like them really..."

Joy placed the degree of social status she is accorded largely within the context of being a woman, and described power relations which emerge from gender roles and expectations. She said

"recently dealing with predominantly male groups in middle age, such as solicitors, executors, have made me realise that winning respect and getting things done are not necessarily a given, unless you are *in* a specific group, such as being a British public schoolboy, which I'm not."

Joy described experiencing having to earn what was rightly hers from men who saw both her gender and age as legitimating their willful obstruction of her. She said her husband sometimes stereotyped her in "typically sexist ways", for instance expecting her to do the cooking, although she says the pendulum of advantage swings between them. Joy reports how her children provide a lot of support, while she explained that one son had been instrumental in challenging her own perceptions of herself in helpful and empowering ways, by likening her to the brilliant young man in the film *Good Will Hunting*. Therefore, for the participants, gender and class intersected in multiple ways, making the



separation of them in analysis nonsense. However, understanding such intersection requires perceiving it in numerous forms, thus I will consider how race and gender, and disability and sexuality intersect, and conclude by looking further at the ways these intersections impact upon individual lives.

### **Race and gender.**

One of the most powerful examples of the intersection of axes of oppression is the gendered nature of racism. Angela Davis (1982) argued that in terms of labour, black slaves in the U.S.A. were genderless as they were expected to be able to carry out the same tasks and reach the same levels of productivity regardless of sex. However, in many other senses, the forms oppression took differed and were explicitly gendered. bell hooks (1982) brands white scholarship on slavery as sexist for uncritically assuming that black men suffered more than black women, and as a result rejecting the experiences of black women as unworthy of study. The basis of these assumptions, she argues, is the overriding concern that black men were **emasculated** as a means of control, and thus suffered the horror of being stripped of the social status of men. The concern about these assumptions is the lack of critique of the system known as 'gender' which secures women's permanent relegation to a lower social position. bell hooks (1982) reveals that black women had to do the same field work as men, perform domestic duties, were forced to reproduce the next generation of slaves, and furthermore suffered sexual assault as a method of control and punishment used by the white slave owners. Angela Davis states,

“Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process to demoralise their men.”(1982:23)

This is an example of the lack of attention given to gender in traditional accounts of racism, despite the ideology surrounding racial oppression being so explicitly gendered.

The gendered nature of racial oppression is highlighted and reinforced in a quotation taken from a white supremacist publication, where one of the recently released

‘white warriors’ recounts his experiences of incarceration. This included his alleged own rape by black men, which is then used to perpetuate the racist belief that black men pose a serious sexual threat to both white women *and* men. He states,

“...I am used like a female... After the rape I was considered a “punk,fag, bitch” and referred to as “her, she, and it.” I was stripped of my manhood...”  
(Thunderbolt no.255. 1980:7 / IN Daniels 1997)

The threat of being emasculated is powerfully invoked through the consequence of being treated as a woman, and being so subordinately positioned by black men is clearly feared in such publications. To relieve these fears, and to rearticulate white male power, many of the cartoon images in such publications involve non-white men being symbolically anally penetrated by the conquering white man. The highly gendered nature of these images, while primarily racial, testifies to the powerful interweaving of two central axes of oppression; race and gender. Interestingly, these images also (perhaps unintentionally) finally reveal gender as a discourse about ‘men’ as well as women because, while Helen (Charles) observes that ‘white’ is rarely conceived in racial terms, for a long time ‘gender’ has been presented as connected exclusively with women (1993). One potential area of work then is to understand how social privilege, at the expense of another group, is ultimately damaging to those so privileged, to begin to unpick the barriers and interrelationships between ‘privilege’ and ‘oppression’, and to begin to interrogate these concepts.

### **Disability and Sexuality.**

A further example of the ways in which vectors of power intersect, is through the dominant discourses of disability and sexuality. Tom Shakespeare argues that disabled people are either expected to be, and/ or represented as asexual (1996), or otherwise are presented as sexual objects for the voyeuristic, controlling gaze of non-disabled people (1993). This, he argues creates additional problems for disabled people fighting to validate an identity defined exclusively by sexuality, that of being either lesbian or gay.



Joanne Doucette confirms this in her discussion of the identities 'lesbian' and 'disabled' being mutually exclusive. She states,

“Sexual difference, especially lesbianism, contradicts stereotypes of disabled women. Disabled women are thought to be childlike and passive, asexual and conforming. Lesbians, sexual by definition, confound this narrow image. The general public, disabled people and even non-disabled lesbians assume that disabled lesbians do not exist, rendering us effectively invisible.” (1989:17)

Thus the narrowly defined nature of so-called 'sexual' identities creates added difficulties for those whose other identities are externally classified as asexual. Therefore the oppressive nature of the external definitions of both identities compounds the issues faced by those inhabiting them.

When Shakespeare draws parallels between the social experiences of women and disabled people, the situation becomes more complex. He argues that the experiences of the two groups share many commonalities, particularly in the ways they are subject to external representation, including social pressure around beauty myths, prevailing body fascism, use in representation as metaphors rather than as subjects, and the objectification they are subjected to. The complexity comes when one explicitly makes clear that some individuals fall into **both** categories, and in recognising that to experience such conditions from *two* identity sources must increase the effect the messages have. If in addition the disabled woman also defines herself as lesbian, it is clear that her experience of marginality may be profound. To additionally consider how that woman may be positioned in terms of race, class, religion and age in relation to the dominant cultural norm, begins to highlight the ways in which some individuals' experiences are totally missing from representation, leading perhaps to the necessity of fracturing one's experience into more socially manageable chunks.

However, to fracture oneself in order to access social and political support can be a soul destroying experience, to never feel a complete person in a space where all one's elements are integrated. Having experienced such fracture, Cherrie Moraga explains the relief when integration occurs,

“Then for the first time, speaking on a panel about racism here in San Francisco, I could physically touch what I had been missing. There in the front row, nodding encouragement and identification, sat five Latina sisters. Count them! Five avowed Latina Feminists: Gloria, Jo, Aurora, Chabela y Mirtha. For once in my life every part of me was allowed to be visible and spoken for in one room at one time... For once, I didn’t have to choose between being a lesbian and being Chicana; between being a feminist and having family.”(1981:xvii)

It is clearly important for specificity to be acknowledged and shared. However, this alone is insufficient. Systems of hierarchisation do not necessarily explicitly exclude. In fact in many ways, very visible attempts are often made to be inclusive and accessible. However, this merely reinscribes and reinforces difference, and underpins the system of binary classification and valuation which sustains social inequality. This system of valuation means that, while one may be included, this might have to be on the condition that one accepts a place at the bottom of the valuation scale. Therefore, recognition of specificity is not enough. The notion of hierarchy, born out of binary thinking must be dismantled.

### **Getting personal.**

This brings us to the third stage of the discussion; looking at the ways in which individuals experience living within and across a range of differently privileged or marginalised categories, and the specific realities they encounter in doing so. Location is a key concept here, and this is something which the participants explored at interview in terms of their experiences of self. Joy organised her narrative by the division between childhood and adulthood, while her life also appeared to be organised within the bordered spaces of 1) France and England where she divides up her time, 2) home/ work/ and her studio where different types of work are carried out, and 3) the public and private sphere, where there appeared to be some lack of recognition of work done. Space was an important theme in Joy’s narrative following uncomfortable experiences when younger. She said



“Erm, mum... / would say things like ‘this is your home but you’re only a guest in it’... /*(a ‘key’ regarding space. When my parents divorced I was not allowed in my father’s home. Access took place on days out. Later their young partners (who seemed in a way like strange siblings to me) increased my exclusion from their homes)... / (The effect that this has had on me is that I am extremely Sensitive about ‘space’ and the manners and anxieties related to occupying someone else’s. This has positive and negative sides.)... / I have wonderful space with my daughter, err this is a great space this, err we make space for ourselves together in many ways, quite often we just err, sit in her room, we have been known to lock the door, to keep these huge blokes in our family out, and err just talk or you know play, or we’ll go out and have a coffee or, err she attends my art courses... / (My place in France has wild space, cosy space and open space, defensible space, natural space and arranged space. In some ways I love it as it is rough and unfinished, full of possibilities, always some little project or other to do)... / but to recap, an artist has that capability of renewal, so that, looking forward to new concepts of space, I hope that I, and the other family members, and friends now, can instigate good spaces for each other, and use all these er tragedies of human life which after all, all of us have, we’re all here to learn in one way and another, to use this in a positive positive way.”*

Thus creating and recreating are important in developing spaces which grow and change, based on Joy’s own agenda, rather than, as had happened previously, on someone else’s.

Moving on directly from the identifications above of the importance of having spaces within which one’s key identities are recognised and validated, the concept of being able to experience oneself holistically emerges. Bamerji states,

“Living in two overlapping worlds, I find a need to create social spaces in which aspects of my personality are not censored and silenced.”(1993:62)

However, an effect of the institutional interweaving of systems of stratification appears to be the enforced separation of multiply marginalising aspects of oneself. This is testified to by Rakesh Ratti who states,

“We proudly share the cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent... This heritage distinguishes us culturally within the Western gay and lesbian communities that many of us join. Similarly, the fact that we are attracted to and love others of our own gender gives us minority status within the South Asian mainstream. These two facets are integral components of our self-

definition, yet they are too often compartmentalised within many of us and thus estranged from one another.”(1993:11)

There appear to be several reasons for the difficulty people face in being able to experience their selves holistically. Firstly, one reason may be that, within a community which is marginalised already, there may be a reluctance to accept in its members any additional features which may potentially threaten to increase that marginalisation. Secondly, within dominant discourse, stereotypes exist which condition people to believe only certain styles of existence are possible. Therefore if one's lifestyle isn't even recognised as feasible, one automatically becomes anonymous. This is the situation for lesbians over the age of sixty five, according to Monika Kehoe (1986), as the stereotype is that with ageing comes a decline in sexual activity, while 'lesbian' remains an identity defined exclusively by sexuality. Thus the challenge of creating spaces within which a diversity of lifestyles can be expressed needs to be approached from a number of fronts.

Antonia described an annual women's camp as a place where she had been able to develop an understanding of her self and sexuality relatively free of social pressure, and this was obviously a fantastic experience for her. She said

“camp... no... that was a *wonderful* place, erm camp... it's a group of women that get together and erm, once a year, and they do erm, it's camping you know, so they usually have communal tents and everything, that type of thing, erm but you can you know take your own tent and they have pitches, and they have like a bit of an organisational committee/ it's, it's not excl, it's not exclusively for lesbian and gay erm women erm it's for erm just women in general, it's women and young children only, they set up a crèche and everything, erm it's very, that is a very... wonderful place to be, you get loads of, a great diversity of people, and there's emm, they have workshops/ anyway, it's just a really expansive enjoyable time, and you can just, do what you feel, and you can just absorb the atmosphere and you're *with* women and that's, that's quite... comforting because you're out in the open”

She said there were no assumptions there regarding sexuality, which allowed for unusual levels of autonomy in reaching definitions for oneself. However, she was realistic about the impossibility of it remaining free if it lasted beyond a certain time scale, as norms and expectations would then develop which people would have to conform to or leave.



If we do not allow for multiple, and potentially contradictory or conflicting identities in the same person, we sustain the dominant discourses which render black women invisible in both the categories of 'woman' *and* 'black', and which present disabled people as asexual, and all parents as heterosexual. These discourses affect individuals' access to and reception within spaces designated for particular groups, while marginal groups' collusion with them hinders their political agenda for change. This is therefore hugely important for the research in terms of creating a space within which all the participants' identities can be articulated and heard in a multitude of ways, without recourse to stereotyping or repression. Laura Alexandra Harris (1996) argues that a politics of multidimensionality is necessary to reveal the limiting monolithic assumptions upon which identities are socially constructed, and to imagine a future politics of collaborative multiplicity. This brings us right back to the political strategy highlighted at the beginning, of revealing the rigid parameters of identities as constructed. While this is seen by some as potentially too radical, with the risk of deconstructing political identities out of existence, Harris has obviously started along the road with this strategy, and found a potential space within which the realities that were previously hidden by assumptions can be explored. The task ahead then seems enormous, the questions infinite, and the path obscured with obstacles. It thus appears not to be a realistic goal for an individual. Therefore, group politics are required. However, at this point I question whether an individual philosopher might begin to illuminate the issues, by conceiving a subjectivity which can act collaboratively without individuality being erased, and whether this philosophy can then be translated into political action. However, the attendant problem might be, as has happened with Queer theory, that putting the philosophy into practice is easier said than done.

### Politics.

To consider a model of political organising which could encompass all the issues raised above is a demanding task. To recognise both specificity and commonality, to accept simultaneous positioning as privileged and oppressed, and to work towards collaboration based on the deconstruction of systems of thought which inscribe inequality

is what is required. Getting people on board, developing shared goals, and identifying strategies would be the next step to consider. This section will explore these issues and will be organised under the sub-headings of

- Single issue organising
- Developing collaboration.

### **Single issue organising.**

A major issue in the political opposition to social oppression is the tendency groups have to be inward facing, putting up barriers to those who ‘don't belong’, and being concerned that incorporating an additional agenda into their politics will result in the emphasis being diverted away from their central concern and onto the additional issue. This was certainly true of the first wave white feminists in the USA who initially supported black men gaining the vote and campaigned in conjunction with them, but once it became clear that black men would be enfranchised before them, white feminists withdrew their support, and revealed their inherent racism and self-interest (Davis:1982; hooks:1982). Conversely, black men were unwilling to support white feminists in their fight for the vote, as they believed that only one of the two groups would be allowed access to the system at that time, and they didn't want to jeopardise their own chances. In all this, enfranchising black women was a concern neither for the majority of black men nor white women, and thus *their* political suspicion of both groups, but in particular white feminist women, has remained strong (Hazel V. Carby:1997). I have indicated earlier that perhaps it is common for oppressed people to be unwilling to accept that in some ways they are also privileged. Perhaps it stems from a worry that accepting one's privilege denies or somehow reduces the importance or severity of the oppression one also experiences. Perhaps too, this comes from our lack of understanding about the ways in which privilege and oppression co-exist in individual lives. In my study then, this has been something I have resisted, as when I became gradually more aware that participants may find resonance with the advert for participation, I began to question whether the privileging of ‘lesbian’ experience would reduce and limit the nature of the study. I moved toward thinking about reductive thinking, and the suppression of differences for



the sake of homogeneity, and believed that a more in-depth study would result from lifting my self imposed restrictions, and re-thinking the central issues I wished to examine.

### **Developing collaboration.**

The widening of my study to consider multiple axes of social stratification coincides with Foucault's agonistic model of power, whereby he accepts that wherever power is exercised resistance will also occur. This reconfiguration of a conceptualisation of power gives a more textured understanding of *multiple power relations* and displaces the notion of power as a single 'top down' force (Deveaux:1994). However, while Postmodern reasoning has in many ways been useful to break the centralised monopoly on 'Truth', a side-effect (whether intentioned or not) has been to alienate groups from one another and to play down their commonalities, while emphasising the ways in which they are oppressed by one another. This is what Foucault describes as the simultaneously totalising and individualising force of State power, as he argues that it prevents coalition through the invocation of 'difference', yet erases difference through reductionism (1984). Oppositional political groups themselves have often bought into this, protesting their persecution and ignoring their own ability to exercise power. What has happened, I believe, is that while challenges to the system have been unilateral, they have been easily dealt with, and this reality has been recognised and harnessed by the State. Thus what is needed is a form of collaboration, which will attack the system of unequal social relations as a whole, while remaining aware of and sensitive to the specificity which is created within different modes of stratification.

At present this seems like a monumental task and so far there have only been a few initial strategies suggested to set the process in motion. Elisabeth Porter, discussing the tensions around cross-party Feminist organising in Northern Ireland argues that a prerequisite of collaboration and progress is the personal commitment to be open to change. She states,

“...positionality refers to the process of constructing different identities that shift with age, new partnerships, changes in viewpoint and political climates... Understandably, there are split loyalties concerning many political and constitutional issues. Some women have had to make enormous personal journeys to shift their orientation in order to work as a coalition with women who are from disparate traditions...” (1997:86/87)

This notion of freeing up one's perspective and being able to make conceptual journeys into other people's reality, is then compatible with Rakesh Ratti's assertion (1993) that those positioned favourably within a binary relationship need to take joint responsibility for organising to dismantle the power relations structured around it. However, he also recognises that the experts on the specific form of oppression are those living under it, and that this recognition should be present when decision and policy making occurs. With the formation of a system of coalition whereby specificity is recognised while commonality built upon, must come a means of theorising about the institutionalised system of oppression.

However, this all presupposes the viability of the continuation of identity based social movements, and this has been fundamentally challenged by Queer theory which argues for the political potential of deconstructing collective categories. This causes an impasse as collective identities are the site of both oppression and resistance. Joshua Gamson states,

“Sexuality-based politics thus contains a more general predicament of identity politics, whose workings and implications are not well understood: it is as liberating and sensible to demolish a collective identity as it is to establish one.” (1998:599)

This debate goes right to the centre of the debate about how civil rights are won, whether by asserting minority status and demanding equal rights, or by challenging the system upon which social inequality is based. The question is whether to destroy the system or access it. My Postmodern philosophy leads me to favour the Queer approach, while Gamson warns that Queer may turn out to be little more than a facade, erasing the differences it claims to enfranchise, and using a new vocabulary to re-cover the same old



ground. However, Gamson does concede that Queer theory raises some key strategic and personal questions, as it enters battles over naming which impact upon notions of self.

The future of social movement political organising rests on the dilemma around the deconstruction of identities, and Gamson (1998) suggests that social identities could be shored up as a pragmatic interim measure. However, what is not asked is, in the event of sexual identities being deconstructed, what would the system of inequality currently established along the gay-straight binary attach itself to, and thus what would be the need for further political action? In other words, without the social identities, how would unequal relations be articulated? From a more conservative position, Gamson questions whether Queer theory might be used to overhaul social movements, while ultimately leaving them intact, while I am left with the question of what the attendant risks of identity deconstruction might be. This question is expanded by a consideration of the politics of subjectivity. Michel Foucault strongly warns against basing oppositional politics on sexual identities as these form a central part of the 'dividing practices' used to tie individuals back to themselves and ground them in an oppressive subjectivity. Instead, Foucault argues that we should refuse what we are defined as and search for other ways of being, which involves challenging the processes which create the self as the subject of oppressive discourses (Deveaux:1994). Foucault (1984) describes three modes of objectification which transform humans into subjects, these being 'inquiry' whereby one becomes an objectivising subject of history; 'dividing practices' which alienate an individual from themselves and from others; and 'objectivising the self' in terms of recognising oneself as a subject of discourses such as sexuality. He goes on to argue that human subjects are located within relations of production and signification, and within complex power relations, and that from this situation, three types of struggle emerge, these being struggles against exploitation, against domination and against subjection (that which ties the individual to her/himself). Johanna Oksala states

"In Foucault's thought, identity is not a metaphysical notion, but (importantly) a political notion that is necessary for those strategies of power through which human beings are made subjects." (1998:39)

This is important for this study as it problematises identities and the biological imperatives they are structured around. The focus of this study then, in Foucauldian terms is the struggle against subjection, particularly within relations of signification. Thus my particular interest is in looking at the processes which have been used to construct particular identities, the agendas which these serve, and the possibilities of alternative configurations, while simultaneously considering the role of processes of signification in subjection and opposition.

Foucault argues that power identifies individuals, and attaches identity to them which must be recognised by the self and others. This is then naturalised within the discourse of 'true' identity, hiding the mechanisms of power. He states that identities are created within historically and culturally changing practices, thus identities are dynamic and contingent, and temporally and spatially specific. The questions Foucault raises then in terms of opposition are; Which aims of power are our identities currently serving? How are they constituted? And how could they be constituted differently? (Oksala:1998). This is in contrast with a Queer interpretation of the problem, as Queer activists, with Parody as a central strategy, focus more on playing with existent pieces of oppressively constituted identities. In terms of my study then these questions are highly relevant as a means of re-thinking identity with the participants, considering the implications of their data and exploring the political project of articulating differently constituted identities.

However, Monique Deveaux (1994) argues that Foucault's notion of agonistic power fails to provide a sustainable view of 'agency', which has implications for political activism and organising, and thus has made it a problematic theory for Feminist theorists to embrace. Deveaux argues that Foucault's central thesis that all relations will be permeated by power was seen as too fatalistic by some Feminists who believed in the possibility of a non-dominated world. Their alternative was to emphasise the importance of choice and its realisation, the articulation and reception of aspirations, and the recognition of experiences as ongoing resistance to oppression as signs of the beginnings of internal empowerment. While these are all elements of a model of empowerment which might be appropriate for exploration in this study, the concept of agency is a key one to keep sight of as a means of considering women's active participation in social



relations. However, Johanna Oksala disagrees with Deveaux arguing that Foucault maintains a notion of the subject as active and intentional, capable of crafting cultural identities which will be the precondition for political organising. She states,

“From Foucault’s perspective, this process of self-definition does not, however, mean revealing a true self. It is not a simple process of self discovery. Rather, political emancipation consists of the recognition and reworking of those procedures steeped in power that have produced us as subjects.” (1998:45)

Thus, a central feature of future data analysis and collection within the study will be the consideration of the ways in which identities have been constructed as an effect of power, and the new configurations the participants can imagine in their lives. Thus the impasse of relying on potentially oppressive identities for political unity can be explored through the potential to construct more empowering identities and form coalitions around them.

### Conclusions.

The above represents *my* understanding of the participants’ views on the issues discussed in the interviews, and the relationship between this and the literature. I have drawn out the themes which ran through the data, and illustrated the range of responses within each theme. The themes were then extended through consideration of the literature and new understandings emerged. I would now like to draw together some of the most interesting points to have surfaced, and begin to make some connections. As this is only the first stage of the fieldwork I am not going to draw conclusions as such, as the work is yet within its early stages. What I intend to do however, is to summarise what I feel are the most exciting issues to have emerged from the data, and to tentatively suggest the interrelationships between them. This will be done with the view to then developing a format which will be used to report back to the participants in terms of the interpretations I have made. The participants will be consulted in order to get their perspectives on the outcomes of this stage of fieldwork, to facilitate working within the anti-oppressive paradigm which underpins the study. This will involve checking out my ideas with the participants and inviting them to challenge anything they feel is inaccurate

or unrepresentative, and also to elaborate on issues which they feel are not yet fully developed in this analysis. The conclusions will therefore be presented as follows:

- Mapping of Issues and Connections:

Key points of interest emerging from the data will be presented, and the connections between them tentatively made. Overarching issues which seem to connect the points are used to organise them into loose clusters.

- Mapping an Overview:

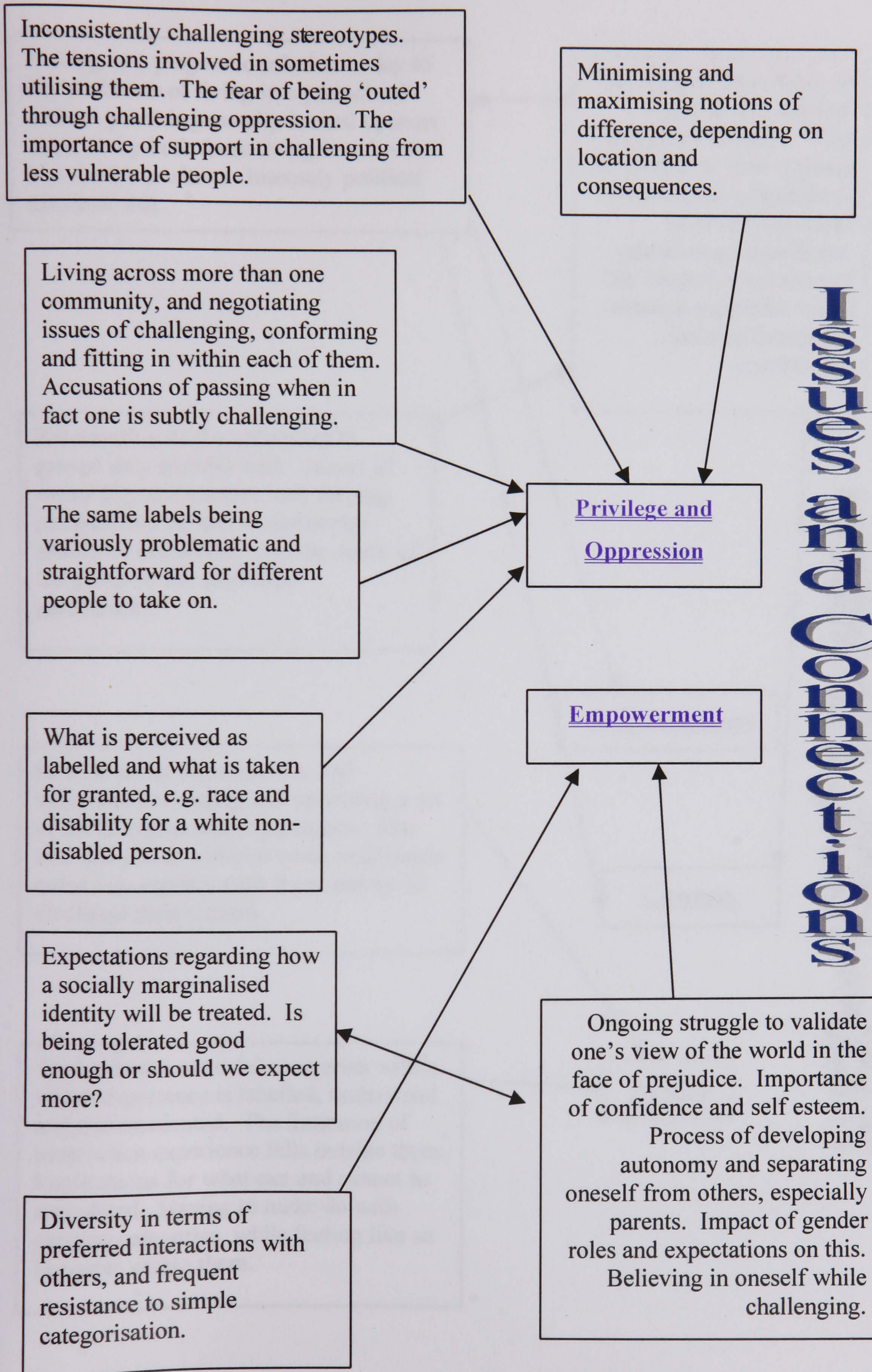
The overarching issues are drawn out and expanded, and the connections between them and the complexity of the interrelationships are highlighted.

This will be followed by consideration of the issues when reporting back to the participants, and what I feel are the central themes to be taken forward into the next phase of fieldwork. The section will conclude with the presentation of the consultation document to use with the participants.

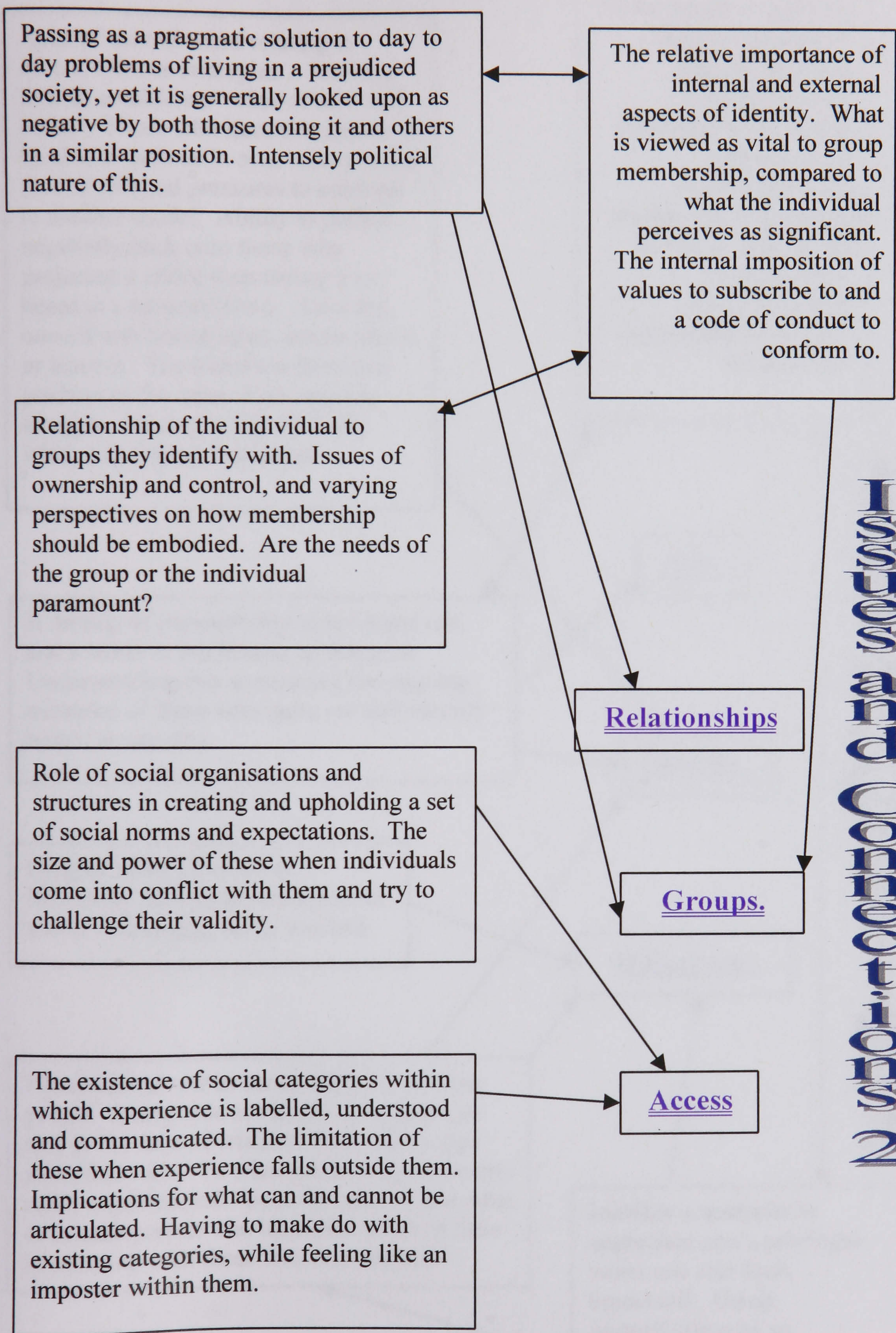
The mapping is presented overleaf...



# Issues and Connections









Issue of control when relating to others: various strategies... masking lack of confidence/ sense of self/ self belief? Those who have this appear to be able to believe in own values in the face of external pressures to conform to another model. Ability to deflect negativity back onto those who projected it rather than taking it on board at a personal level. Asserting oneself and letting other people take it or leave it. The transition from one position to the other as an ongoing struggle. Having to fight initially while still feeling vulnerable.

Using masks or different faces as a means of negotiating roles, expectations and stereotypes, rather than coming out or challenging. The reaction of other people to this... keeping it a secret strategy. Perceived social unacceptability of this. Masquerade.

A feeling of impossibility to not come out, and a belief in the honour of doing so. Understanding this as securing the ongoing existence of those who pass, yet still identify within an identity.

Choices being taken away. Personally developed strategies for subtly challenging being blocked.

Perception of self as same/ different as other people. Being able to validate own path (or not) in the face of criticism from others you identified with. To what extent is commonality really experienced? Does the label fit and what does each person who identifies within it have in common with those who also identify?

Self.

Identity.

Difference.

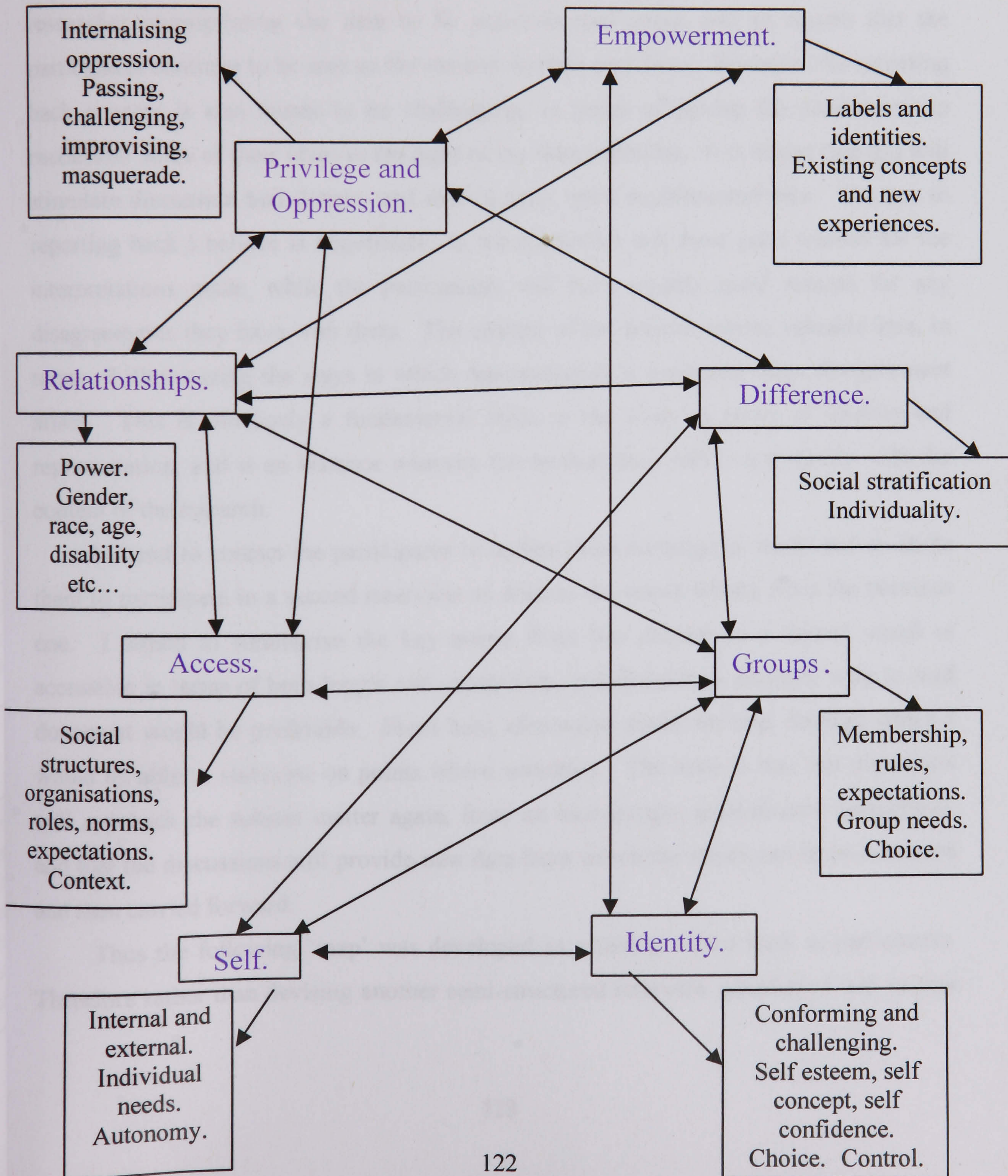
Inability sometimes to appreciate one's privileges when one also feels oppressed. Using improvisation as an alternative to passing or challenging.

Issues and Connections



# OVERVIEW.

Illustration of the complexity of the connections between the issues.





This section of conclusions will be completed by considering the issues involved in reporting back to participants, and identifying the key areas in which I would like the work to move forward.

Reporting back is important in terms of checking out with the participants that the interpretations made from their data are representative, fair, and accurate. In this study it forms part of the process of empowering the participants, to share ownership of the outcomes of the study of which they are a central part. It is intended to prevent myself as researcher appropriating the data to fit pre-conceived ideas, and to ensure that the participants continue to be seen as the experts on their own lives. However, the reporting back process is also meant to be challenging, in terms of getting the participants to reconsider some of their ideas in the light of my interpretations. It is hoped that this will stimulate discussion and debate, and lead to new, more sophisticated data. The key to reporting back I believe is negotiation, as the researcher will have good reasons for the interpretations made, while the participants will have equally good reasons for any disagreements they have with them. The content of the debates can be valuable data, in terms of illuminating the ways in which representation is contested when disagreement arises. This is obviously a fundamental issue in the study in terms of identity and representation, and is an instance whereby the methodology links very closely with the content of the research.

I intend to contact the participants to update them on progress made, and to invite them to participate in a second interview to discuss the issues arising from the previous one. I intend to summarise the key points from this chapter in a format which is accessible in terms of both length and vocabulary, and therefore a succinct, easy to read document would be preferable. From here, discussion could develop, through which I would be able to elaborate on points where necessary. The hope is that this discussion will approach the subject matter again, from an increasingly sophisticated perspective, and that the discussions will provide new data from which the issues can be re-examined and then carried forward.

Thus the following 'map' was developed as a tool to report back to participants. Therefore rather than devising another semi-structured interview schedule, I will engage

the participants in discussion of their opinions of the map in order to collect the next stage of data. A copy of the map in a reduced size format is presented overleaf.



**OVERVIEW:** The central theme which emerged from the interviews was the tension between the pull to be an individual, and the extent to which this is limited and controlled by others' definitions of you as 'different'. This tension seems to be most strongly felt in terms of self concept, and in the way relationships with others are structured. The other boxes outline the many aspects of this tension, and the arrows show the complexity of their interrelationship.

#### Being an individual.

Having your own definition of yourself, rather than one based on what other people think. Living your life on your own terms, being able to express yourself in ways which feel right for you. Being able to be who you are, rather than who other people want you to be. The extent to which ways of being are actively chosen by yourself, and when these are imposed, or your choices limited by others or society.

#### Self concept.

The ways in which you are constantly developing as a person in terms of your self awareness and understanding. Understanding how you relate to others, the extent to which you like and believe in yourself, and the level of ownership you feel you have over your own life. How you manage the balance between asserting your individuality and wanting to be accepted by others.

#### Being 'different'.

Other people judging you for not being like them and for not fitting their expectations. Being told or made to feel that being who you are is wrong or bad. Being expected to think, feel and act in ways which you don't agree with. Being labelled, excluded and targeted (maybe also attacked) for being yourself. Having to take into consideration the needs and expectations of others, and the norms and rules imposed by society when deciding to what extent you are able to be yourself. The risks involved with being seen to deviate from social norms.

#### Relationships with others.

How other people respond to you, and how they make you feel about yourself. The levels of support you get from other people in being yourself, and whether this is unconditional or depends upon you fulfilling some of their expectations. The extent to which being accepted by others involves compromise on your behalf: when you are happy to do this and when it feels compulsory. The experience of life as a process of negotiation between asserting your individuality and living within society's expectations.

#### Challenging.

The ways in which you might resist other people's negative interpretations of you. Ensuring your experiences are not made invisible or misrepresented just because they are uncommon. How far you choose to resist and to what extent you are forced into it by circumstances or other people's expectations. Awareness that challenging might elicit consequences which threaten your safety. Having to make a decision between defending your principles and staying safe.

Passing. (this involves letting wrong assumptions made about you go unchallenged to prevent being discriminated against. It can also mean giving a false impression of yourself to encourage other people to make wrong assumptions about you.)

What you consider to be acceptable to conceal, and when this begins to feel like being untrue to yourself. Dealing with negative feelings for not standing up for your beliefs. Dealing with other people's expectations about how open you will be. Sustaining stereotypes by using them to your advantage, and feeling ambivalent about this. Sometimes claiming to be no different than anyone else, and at other times emphasising your differences, depending on what you wish to achieve. Responding to other people's agendas, and being forced into ways of being that are in conflict with your own.

#### Internalising oppression.

Feeling alone and unsupported in standing up to the negative attitudes of others. Being unsure of the support you will get from others around you if you do choose to challenge. The impact on your self esteem of being labelled as different and excluded. Wondering whether you are normal because you don't share the same views as other people. The expectations you have about how other people will treat you, and what is acceptable.

#### Self image and self esteem.

The difficulties of developing and maintaining this when you are labelled, excluded and targeted (maybe even attacked verbally or physically) as being 'different'. The potential to begin to take on board the negative responses of others when there isn't anyone to reinforce the belief you have in yourself. The extent to which you feel able to challenge this on different occasions, and what not challenging feels like. Other people may only respond positively when you fulfil their expectations, while what they expect may be very different to what you want for yourself.

#### Choice and control.

The extent to which you feel you have control over your own life, and being satisfied with how it is perceived. The different degrees of power you have in various situations to resist having choices imposed on you. The kinds of choices which you feel are available to you, and those things which you are prevented from choosing. To what extent those choices are yours, or are forced upon you by society's or other people's expectations. The extent to which you have to balance feeling safe and expressing yourself in the ways you would like. How empowered or disempowered all this makes you feel.

Being able to separate your own perceptions of yourself from those other people have of you. Being in a process of continually developing autonomy, comparing how you feel about things now to how you felt 5 or 10 years ago. The amount of importance you place on your own feelings compared to how other people feel about you. The impact which other people's negative responses can have, and the problems involved in dealing with other people's expectations.

#### Access.

Wanting to avoid situations where you might have to choose between passing and challenging. Feeling restricted about where you can go and still feel comfortable and safe to be yourself. Finding other people deliberately trying to make life difficult for you. Having to earn what should be yours by right, such as respect, access to information, services etc... Having to conform to certain stereotypes to be accepted into certain places/spaces.

#### Group membership.

The importance of experiencing being accepted and belonging, and the extent to which you are willing to compromise to get this. Being with other people who are like yourself, where fitting in does not feel like conforming. Group membership may involve accepting norms, such as how you should look and act, and what you should think and feel. How relevant do these norms seem in terms of what the group represents? How much you feel you have in common with the other people in the group, and how close you are willing to let other people get to you, compared to when you keep them at a distance. The experience of being a member of mainstream society and a sub-culture or community, and dealing with the different norms and expectations in each. Recognising the intensely positive aspects of group membership, and weighing these against the compromises you have to make. How some members of a group are given more respect and authority than others, while the right of some people to belong is challenged. The isolation involved when you are not able to identify with a group who share some of your experiences.

#### Labels and identities.

The groups you identify with in order to understand your own experience and feelings, and the words which are attached which signal to other people who you are. People who identify differently can be excluded, or made to conform if they want to belong. The reasons you have for choosing to identify in particular ways, and how others in the group respond to this. Many stereotypes can go along with identities and these may be restrictive to yourself and/or others. The same identity can mean different things to different people, and one definition may be considered more valid than another. Identities can be both affirming and restrictive, especially if they are imposed by other people. Other people may challenge your right to identify in a particular way, or argue that you should identify differently. The ways you choose to signal your identification to other people, and why sometimes it feels very important to be seen and recognised for what you are.

#### Context.

The degree to which you feel able to be yourself can depend on where you are and who else is there. In some situations you will feel comfortable, while in others you may feel like an outsider, and the extent to which you can be accepted will vary depending on the context. Where you are will determine what you have to do in order to fit in, and the extent to which you can be open about yourself. You may care more about fitting into some situations than others. Society creates norms about how you should respond in different situations and these are related to your race, age, gender, sexuality and relationships and class, as well as other factors. The extent to which you conform to or challenge these norms will be affected by the context you are in, and what you are likely to achieve compared to what the costs may be.



28/3/00

I can totally relate to loads of bits in the chapter we just wrote, like there not being enough labels to totally be able to describe yourself. Andy, I told you I was straight and you thought you knew me by that word, and you left me. But it is so far from explaining who I am and how I feel. My gender, my sexuality, my self... it says nothing about me. Okay so I sleep with different people now. But who I am. It says nothing about that and I have no idea how to start to tell you. The words don't exist to make you understand. Amber has words though. Loads of them. I'm fast on the keyboard now, even though I still only use two fingers. Amber's words are written and spoken and go on and on. They roll around my head and empty into my journal. I say them back to her when we're discussing things, and I write them and send them to you. I'm hoping one day she'll say the words which will just fit me perfectly.

Then I'll send them to you and you'll understand me again like you used to.

31/3/00

We've finally got the first part of the thesis finished. Only two more parts to go. Amber wanted to take a break so she and her partner have gone to the Lakes for a long weekend so I've got the time off too. I've been thinking about writing to my real mum, now I've got her details, but I'm not sure. I feel screwed up about it. The Social Services counsellor suggested I write all the things I wanted to say in a letter, and then rip it up and throw the pieces into the sea. Like, to let go of it and be able to

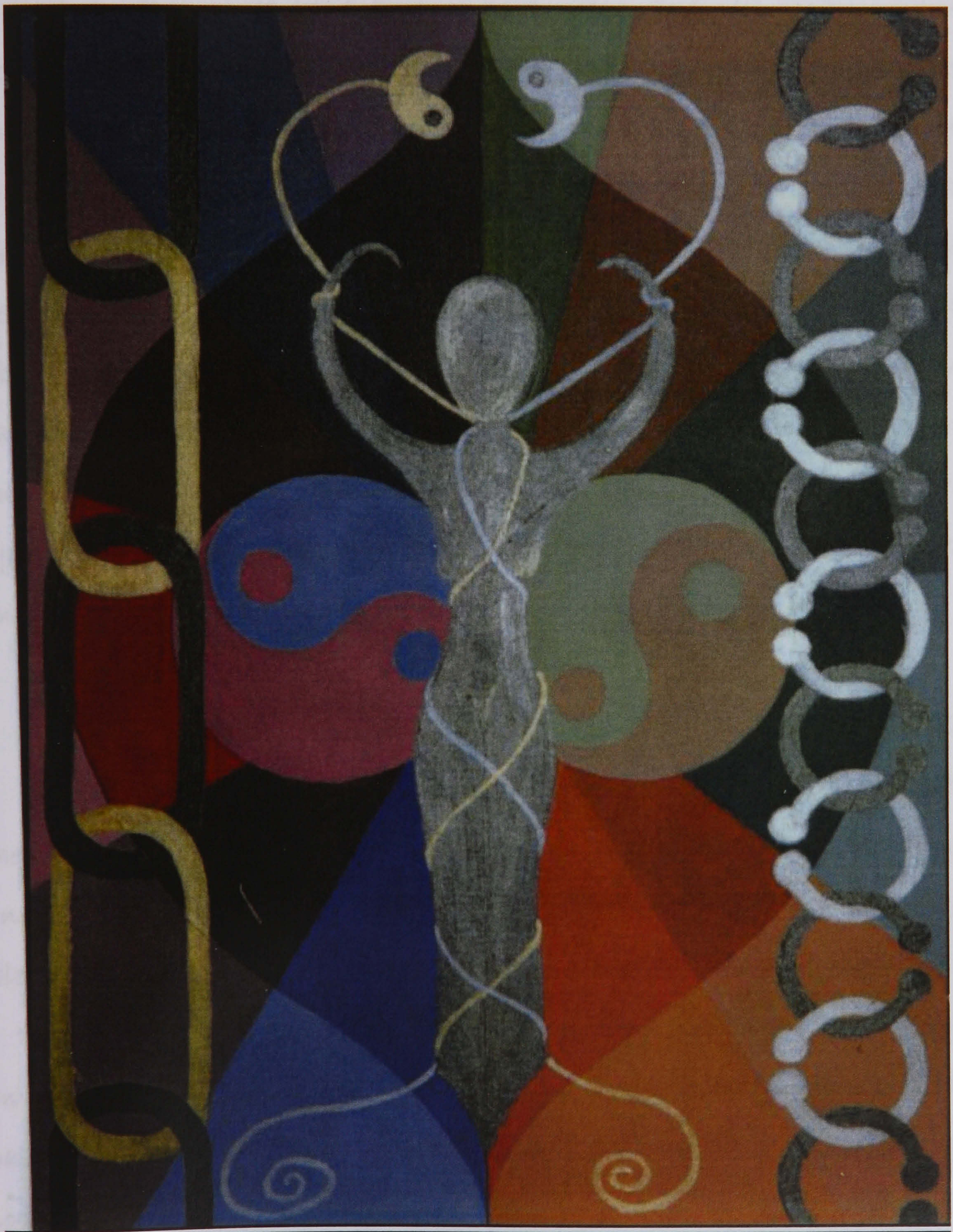


move on. To forgive. Amber laughed when I told her, "that old chestnut" she said. I think she meant that it was quite a clichéd thing to do, but I gave it a try anyway. I needed a break, I was beginning to feel bogged down with it, and I overheard Amber telling her partner she thought I might be depressed. So into the sea went my anger, pain, regrets, love, anticipation, fears, rejection... the lot. And when I came back I felt empty, as if I'd thrown everything away and nothing was left. It's like they're dead and I've just got to accept that. So where do I look for myself now?

I re-read the chapter Amber and I have just completed, trying to draw strength from the ways Amber contains uncertainty in manageable ways. She seems to be able to just live with it, without it descending into chaos, so I try and do the same.



## Part Two: Finding My Way.





9/4/00

I wonder what Amber thinks of me? She said I could borrow her shoes today. She's lent me her jacket and stuff before, when I've been pissed off saving to go travelling and thinking of blowing some of my savings on clothes. But shoes have always been taboo, and yet today I went shopping in her kitten heel moccasins with the dainty embroidery on the front. I nearly died when she told me to go right to the back of the wardrobe and I pulled them out. They're not the type of shoes I would have had her in. She's more a DM person, but she said she'd got them for a special occasion just before her crash, and never got to wear them. I felt fabulous clipping around the supermarket in them! It was great... but I'm fearful about where Amber is going with this. Is she playing with me, or am I being completely paranoid? I try and bury myself in work, tire myself out so I don't toss and turn in bed covered in an anxious sweat. I'm just coping day to day at the minute.

15/4/00.

Amber says we're beginning to really get into it now. She said that when she took the map to the participants she had quite long conversations with them about it, but that she didn't feel they were really able to challenge it. She didn't really know why this was, but she began to think about how to analyse the data she'd gathered from these conversations, and how to then report this back, again looking to be challenged on her conclusions. She said it was here that she decided to incorporate her own art making. She'd previously used it in her

undergraduate research to reflect upon her own coming out process, and that part of this had been to use her work to challenge the audience to bring their selves to the 'viewing experience', rather than trying to figure out what the artist intended. This scares the shit out of me as I wonder how much farther I am going to be dragged into this and have my layers peeled off me as I stand silently screaming. Amber said that she began to wonder whether asking the participants to bring themselves to the consultation by presenting them with a series of images might engage them more in terms of expressing their opinions. I'm curious to see if they'll just run a mile in the opposite direction like I want to do. Or whether they'll be hooked, and be compelled to stay and explore themselves regardless... again just like me.

Now, despite my fear which I know is motivated by years of self preservation, I also find this incredibly exciting, and I type faster and faster as Amber dictates it. She explains how she began to think much more seriously about methodology, in terms of what her study was about, what knowledge was, what the respective roles of the researcher and participants were, and how to make the use of art making 'rigorous' and 'systematic'. I can tell I'm well into it because I've learnt her language and I'm hanging there with her like a kid who is desperate to know the next bit of the story. But she says that before we get to the really interesting bit, we've got to say something sensible about methodology, in terms of setting out her 'parameters and philosophy'. Once this is done,



the creativity will have a framework to support it and give it wings.  
Sounds good to me. So we wrote the holding frame for what comes next.



## Introduction to Part Two.

### What does Methodology Mean?

Following the process of analysis of the first wave of data, a conceptual ‘map’ was produced to report back my provisional conclusions to the participants. This reporting back and ‘consultation’ was seen as vital to the study in terms of having my work challenged and/ or validated by the people involved. I hoped that the information in the ‘map’ would stimulate discussion and debate, challenge the participants to think about their experiences in new ways, and invite them to critically comment on the interpretations I had made, in order to move my thinking on and push the study forward. It felt like a very dynamic stage of the research process, and it was invested with great importance as I began to think around more philosophical issues to do with identity, subjectivity, power and participation. Thus the second interview, at which I introduced the map was developed out of my synthesis of my learnings from the literature, and reflections on the research process so far. The map alone was used to stimulate discussion with the participants and in this way the interviews were unstructured, as I prepared no questions and encouraged the participants to approach the map in whatever way they chose. This was important as I had previously been quite prescriptive in terms of the interview questions, and wanted now to begin to shift the emphasis of the study away from my control and onto the participants. At this stage, two participants decided to no longer be involved, as one was going travelling and the other expressed the desire to leave her contribution as it stood. However, the other five participants were keen to work with the map, and explore their feelings towards it. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and this data was analysed initially in the same way as the first set had been. However, during this process, I began to think that the participants’ responses to the map had on the whole been quite complicit and reluctant to challenge in really significant ways. I could not believe that on my first attempt I had been able to represent their views so accurately, and thus I concluded that the method of reporting back was not sufficiently accessible to enable the participants to really express alternative views, and re-negotiate the conclusions I had drawn.



I became concerned that, because naively I had started the study very much from my own frame of reference, and thus got responses at interview which began to answer my own questions, that the participants had not been able to engage particularly meaningfully with the project in the initial stages. Thus when it came to the stage of consultation, the participants again were restricted in terms of the level of response they could make. Thus many of the responses made by the participants confirmed and elaborated on points raised in the 'map', while little challenging occurred. For instance, Louise said

"the first one that I've got that I related to... erm... which I thought was quite sort of... huge for me, was [internalising oppression] erm, but even with that... it's right... but there's parts of it that I don't feel are right as well, erm... where it says 'feeling alone and unsupported in standing up to negative attitudes of others' that's right. but, in as much as I do it, but I don't tend to do it a great deal... so that, as you've done, links with other things anyway, so that was, that was pretty spot on..."

while Antonia said

"I thought it was excellent actually, I mean, as a piece of work. I liked the overview, but I would like the overview because that's the way that I tend to look at things as well, erm you know, pulling together the different things, erm... well you haven't mentioned the word conflict, have you? Mmmm, no. You've used a euphemism, "tensions" 'at the pull to be an individual and the extent this is limited and controlled by others', you know so you haven't used conflict, but I think it is a conflict within yourself... but it's put in, tension, conflict, it's unresolved conflict isn't it but that's all I would say about that."

This was a familiar pattern in terms of the content of the map. However, the format of the map was challenged more rigorously, as Antonia suggested that 'self esteem' be put in the middle and arms come out of it with the other concepts on the end of each arm. Joy alternatively suggested that I produce a replica of the map, but with empty boxes, to allow participants to respond in the boxes. She also drew a spiral at the centre of the map, and put a body within that to represent the self. Thus the participants seemed to be saying more about the process of consultation and its effectiveness than about the explicit content of the study.



Thus after fully completing the first stage of fieldwork, and bringing back experiences of reporting back to participants which were not particularly satisfying, I decided to experiment with art making as both an analytical and a communicative tool, to facilitate more effective consultation. I moved on to thinking about ways of knowing which would be more empowering to participants, and methods of communicating interpretative knowledge in a way which enfranchised the participants to make their own interpretation and express their own views. It was at this point that the use of art making within the study, which had been planned from the beginning, began to take shape and become more formalised. It was also at this point that I began to interrogate 'methodology' as a concept within the research, and decided that I needed to consult theory and make a statement about my own theoretical approach to the study. I felt that only when this was done could I begin to transgress from established conventions of methodology, and develop innovative ways of gathering and analysing data, and generating real dialogue with participants about conclusions. I therefore developed Part Two of the thesis to examine what I felt to be the key methodological issues. I have thus divided Part Two into three chapters. The first, Chapter 5, considers the **principles** upon which the study is based, in terms of a Postmodern stance on knowledge, a commitment to working anti-oppressively, a recognition of my self as an active agent within the study, and a consideration of ethics. Chapter 6 gives a brief description of the **process of data analysis** through art making and presents the findings as a set of seven paintings, while Chapter 7 focuses on the possibility of **utilising creative arts** within research methodology, examining the links between identity and visual representation, the role of the arts within oppositional political movements, and finally the relationship between the aesthetic and hegemony.



## Chapter 5.

### Principles.

This chapter will examine the principles on which the study is based, and consider some of the philosophical questions I faced. It will be organised under four themes:

- knowledge,
- paradigm,
- self,
- ethics.

### Knowledge.

The first principle I chose to examine, was what the implications would be of working within a Postmodern model of knowledge. This was important as the debates between Modern and Postmodern philosophies had already been implicated in the study in relation to identity and political opposition to unequal social relations, and thus the implications for the *process* of the study, as well as the *content* of the study began to emerge. It was at this stage that the focus of the study, and the way it was carried out began to become inextricably linked. This process was validated by Joshua Gamson (2000) who explored the ways in which Queer theory's questioning of the existence of lesbian and gay subjects, ran parallel with the Postmodern challenge around what constituted knowledge and the impact of this for research and methodology. However, groups organising politically from a shared marginalized identity have been suspicious of embracing a theory which incorporates within its philosophy the deconstruction of the identities around which their political organising has been based (Shakespeare:1996; Strickland:1994), thus an exploration and justification of it was necessary.

From my own perspective, the importance of embracing a new epistemology is vital to be able to imagine new ways of configuring identity. In the West in the early part of this century, challenges to the Modernist reductive form of knowledge emerged within



the oppositional discourses of the Black Civil Rights movement and the Women's Movement, and consequently with a resurgence of post-war activity, alternative knowledge claims were put forward. Hitherto silenced academics, speaking from marginalized spaces, began to be able to represent their own reality on their own terms for the first time, and to concurrently be heard, albeit by those who were prepared to listen. Thus a new set of specific and contextual knowledges began to challenge one totalising unmitigated knowledge. However, many of these new knowledges merely replicated the format of the former one, but on a smaller scale. What oppositional political groups have done, is taken advantage of the discursive spaces opened up through the collapse of metanarratives, but without following through and adopting a new model of legitimation for their subsequent contributions to knowledge. The identities from which these theorists spoke remained narrow and rigid, while their central politics failed to address internal differences such as class, race, sexuality, age etc. As individuals are multiply positioned along potentially marginalizing axes as these, the possibility of being multifariously disadvantaged creates what has so far been too complex a social reality for any one political or social movement to resolve or organise around.

A Postmodern model of knowledge however, would have facilitated the construction of more specific knowledges, attentive to internal differences and able to contain these within its narrative without silencing them. This is due to the employment of discontinuous narratives to represent the diversity of social life without the reliance on over arching unifying structures. Thus a Modern epistemology, with its emphasis on discursive foreclosure and complete communications lacks the internal flexibility to conceive of and represent social life in all its diversity. Thus for me, the employment of a Postmodern epistemology is a pre-requisite of being able to conceptualise the diversity I wish to study and give voice to. However, it is feared that accepting a Postmodern epistemology, with an acceptance of the partial and non-hierarchical nature of knowledge will foreclose the possibility of critiquing oppressive discourses, and undermine the possibility of large group political organising. Strickland (1994) argues that by asserting a democratic pluralism, whereby no position may be privileged above any other, the legitimacy of critiquing systems of power is denied within Postmodernism. This transpires through discourse being small-scale, and therefore considered applicable only



to the locality within which it is created. However, I would argue that a position which attends to the full diversity of social relations and is capable of theorising its complexity would therefore be in a very strong position to critique systems of power, due to the multiplicity of oppressions it could speak of simultaneously. However, this would require a new way of thinking about power and resistance, moving away from a single focus resisting a single force, for instance with the Women's Movement, and instead think of power as a central body with numerous points around its circumference from which power would be deployed in a diversity of ways. Foucault (1984) argues that identity is a function of power deployed to fulfil a specific agenda. Thus resistance means imagining alternative identities which can fulfil the agendas of those identifying within them. This would enable groups to maintain an identity from which to organise and act, yet dispense with rigid binary categories which mask diversity and create unequal social relations. Thus this approach differs from the Modern agenda of re-valuing the devalued side of the binary, and instead deconstructs the myth of the existence of binary categories of people, and replaces it with identities which are more numerous, fluid and diverse.

In addition to this, the Postmodern stress on particularity and locality can appear to preclude the possibility of women for example, with potentially diverse experiences of the multiple workings of social stratification collaborating on a shared political project. However, with the model I am using here, diversity is a strength as the potential for making theorising more sophisticated and getting nearer to the central body of power would be greater. For instance if three women, one disabled, one Black and one lesbian worked together each may feel that their difference was most significant in their marginalisation as women within the same work force, for instance, where they had all been passed over for promotion. By collaborating in their resistance, looking at the similarities and differences in their experiences and considering what effect being *additionally* positioned as Other might make for their current situation, they could make a case which went beyond sexism, homophobia, racism or ableism but moved into the more powerful territory of the interweavings of all of them. This is the model I intend to use in this study, to discover something of the workings of power by exploring the different ways in which a group (who under Modernism would be assumed to be



homogenous) experience the deployment of power. The importance of this for my study is two fold. Firstly looking at the ways in which a Postmodern conception of knowledge is influential within the study, and secondly to examine how issues of ‘oppression’ and ‘marginality’ will be handled as potential metanarratives, within a framework which seeks to eradicate these.

Firstly then, the basis of the study is a case study which is small scale, local (in terms of the demography of the participants) and particular. It is not the intention to draw widespread generalisable conclusions, but to raise issues with which others may find resonance. The concept of resonance is particularly important here, as it does not assume complete congruity with the findings of the research group, but more a sense of a felt understanding whereby aspects of the study illuminate parts of other lives in a multiplicity of ways. John Spindler (1996) uses the concept of resonance in explaining the power of fiction in the creation of knowledge, arguing that insights implicit in the fiction may not be easily explicated, but that a felt understanding of the significance of a text can lead to learning for the reader. He states,

“In a sense the meanings remain implicit. Fictional writing may evoke a feeling that something important is going on, and may give us a sense of what it is, without providing an explicit and clear articulation of it. Though fictional writing, and other art forms, may make implicit meanings explicit it may also generate a kind of understanding which remains tacit and which we cannot adequately define. Increasingly I am becoming interested in the way fictional writing, and possibly other art forms, allow us to create texts which provide their audience with a sense of these implicit aspects of understanding, and challenges the reader to explore their own feelings about the issues they find in them.” (1996:10/11)

The study will in no way attempt to establish norms, but instead will focus on specificity, idiosyncrasy, particularity, and to tell specific ‘truths’ as they exist for individual participants. However, this will be in the context of a research text which empowers the reader to make their own meaning of resonances, rather than these meanings being predetermined within the text. This is intended as a direct and explicit challenge to reductive thinking which limits and restricts individuals. The study will recognise the participants *and audience* as being in process, considering the effects of the passage of



time on experience, and will perceive knowledge and truths as evolving in a potentially non-linear way. It will also recognise and interrogate the social structures within which lives are based and the multiple and often contradictory discourses within which individuals understand and make sense of their experiences. The study will take account of and investigate the contexts within which lives are experienced, and note the contingency which the movement across many diverse contexts necessitates. It will also recognise and explore the changing meanings which a single experience may have across times and contexts.

The unit of the study is the group, but this group shall be viewed as a collection of individuals, whose commonalities shall be recognised without their differences being erased. Inconsistencies of experience shall be viewed as valuable data rather than as anomalies, and the study will include a critique of the concept of 'difference' and the normalising categories from which difference implies individuals deviate. The study will involve an interrogation of identities which whether established from a dominant or marginal position assert homogeny and linearity, and this will involve looking at the whole picture, rather than privileging one aspect as the central tenet of a life, the rest being subjected to its assumed organisational prerogative. This will then be linked to notions of subjectivity and power, and the dilemma within oppositional political organising around the continued relevance of social identities.

Secondly, the influence of a Postmodern conception of knowledge will impact upon the ways in which experiences are viewed and reported. Both 'oppression' and 'marginality' are concepts which suggest a metanarrative, containing a plethora of assumptions and generalisations, and up to this point in the study these terms were and have been utilised uncritically. Therefore, for the purposes of this study it is necessary to define these terms and explain how they fit within a Postmodern philosophy. My starting position is Foucault's analysis of identity and subjectivity, whereby he argued that power is deployed to construct individuals within subjectivities which subjugate individuals to the will of the political structure of the State (1984). This is not to assume a universal relationship between individuals and the State, but to recognise that we are subjects of power and that various discourses of power will construct us in multifarious ways, creating a diversity of subjectivities in social life. Thus it is then important to recognise



that individuals in our society may experience unfair treatment due to their discursive construction within social categories which are structured within unequal binary relations. This relationship is naturalised and the effects of power hidden as a means of concealing the ideological nature of the identities which are utilised to articulate subjects in specific ways. Value of individuals in our society is thus accorded among other things on one's race, ethnicity, language, colour, class, occupation, sex, gender, sexuality, physical and intellectual abilities, religious and political beliefs, and the identities attached to these. One's positioning in relation to these axes from which identities are created creates a complex web of social valuation and attendant treatment which varies on an individual basis. These axes of stratification are socially constructed 'differences' as while many skin tones exist for instance, the valuation of one over another is a social construction rather than generating from any innate quality. Thus when an individual experiences the effects of objectifying practices, I call this 'oppression'.

However, this is not intended as an over-arching and totalising concept. In my study it will relate to individual experiencing, and as a term it will describe a wide diversity of happenings which will be experienced in a multiplicity of ways. Oppression will describe the multiplicity of outcomes of individuals being created as subjects through 'dividing practices' which have been socially inscribed as significant. The extent to which individuals experience oppression may be linked to the meanings constructed around various 'differences', for instance it might be more socially acceptable to be poor than to be gay or disabled, but this may or may not be reflected in degrees of social inclusion. A fundamental aspect of these discrepancies then is the barriers to social participation which people may experience, and their ability to invoke agency. Individuals may find that they are legislated against, represented as unlawful, undesirable, unwell or not welcome, and thus are restricted in the contribution they are able to make to social life. In trying to oppose and end such subjectivity, individuals have organised in groups with people with whom they share characteristics in common, and these groups often describe themselves as 'marginalized' from the processes of power which articulate them. However, in my study, from a Postmodern perspective, I would recognise that each individual within a group will be unique in terms of their social positioning, and thus the group itself is not uniformly 'oppressed'. However, as a



group organising from a common aim to increase their social inclusion, the issue of marginalisation is relevant to them. Thus a group of lesbian women will be described as marginalized, but this will be within the context of group identification, rather than on the specific realities of the individuals within the group. This is a working definition which will be examined and developed as part of the continuing agenda of the study, and thus stands as a contingent statement of my understanding.

## **Paradigm.**

The issues of oppression and marginalisation, are fundamentally relevant to the discussion around paradigm. Patricia Maguire (1987) describes a paradigm as a location from where to observe reality. It is made up of theories, questions, methods and procedures which all share a common value scheme, and which influence what direction inquiry will take and how revelations will be perceived. My paradigm is best termed 'anti-oppressive', and its use in this study developed out of a Feminist or anti-sexist paradigm which was where my thinking originally began. The anti-sexist paradigm developed to highlight and remedy the ways in which women were excluded or misrepresented within mainstream academic research, while the Feminist paradigm moved this forward politically, in asserting that this misrepresentation was a deliberate act of oppression. This argument asserted that women as a social group were oppressed by men on the basis of an unequal social valuation of gender within dualistic thinking, whereby 'female' is constructed in opposition and subjugation to 'male' within the Western culture. While recognising the power differentials within gendered relations, and the impact and importance of this on and for research, my developing awareness of other axes of social stratification and the power relations within these, made a Feminist or anti-sexist paradigm per se inadequate. A recognition of the multiple axes by which women may experience oppression meant that a broader paradigm was necessary; one which took account of the ways in which individuals are multiply positioned across social structures.

The employment of an 'anti-oppressive' paradigm therefore became paramount, in order to provide a structure through which to examine and oppose all forms of inequality



in both the research process and society. However, while some researchers had begun to look at anti-discriminatory practices within research methodology (Humphries and Truman: 1994), this had as yet not developed into the full theorisation of an anti-oppressive paradigm. Thus much developmental work had to be done within my study<sup>1</sup>. It was therefore important to link a concept of 'anti-oppressive' very closely with my previous definition of 'oppression' to be able to consider the ways in which this new paradigm might begin to intervene in subjectifying processes of power. The key was Foucault's examination of identities, in terms of the ways they had been articulated through discourses of power to create specific subjectivities, and the ways they could be reconfigured to express more empowered ways of being (1984). Furthermore Oksala's view of being able to be an active participant in the process of shaping new identities was fundamental (1998). My starting point then, in terms of basic principles was that an anti-oppressive paradigm should not only facilitate an awareness of the multiple dimensions of oppression people may experience, but also seek to avoid the denial or erasure of experiences which fell outside the explicit remit of the research, thus not replicating the barriers to social participation within the wider society. Therefore the values it would be predicated on should prevent a study which aims to investigate the impact of racism on women with a disability, being able to ignore the specific experiences of any lesbians within the research group. Carole Truman states,

"In practice, the challenge of difference requires not just a feminist approach which focuses on criteria to do with the notion of 'woman' but also approaches which deal with other aspects of being woman."(1994:26)

Research within an anti-oppressive paradigm then would be open to perceiving alternative realities, which would mean that concepts had to be broad enough to be able to recognise a diversity of realities, thus exploding the myths presented through narrowly defined identities.

The anti-oppressive paradigm would seek to uncover and attend to diversity beyond the dominant norm, for instance, if one's concept of 'woman' precludes male to female

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<sup>1</sup> Truman, Mertens & Humphries: 2000: within this book the editors did suggest a framework for anti-exclusionary research. However, as this was published towards the end of my study I believe that a lot of my learning about a possible anti-oppressive paradigm was original.



transsexuals who label themselves women, then avenues of enquiry to explore this reality will not be pursued. This, it was hoped would then expand the possibilities of new articulations of identity, and work towards more empowering and less prescriptive ways of being. Humphries, Mertens and Truman (2000) defined 'empowering' research as being *on*, *for*, and *with* participants, using interactive and dialogic methods as opposed to Positivist approaches in order to increase the quality of participation. Research furthermore should be participatory in terms of re-negotiating the researcher-participant relationship, to explore issues of control and to involve the participants in the generation of theory and ideas. Thus the workings of power could be deconstructed within the research process, and research relations be used to experiment with other ways of constructing collaborative knowledge. The researcher and study should be non-judgmental, and the researcher should examine their own prejudices and attitudes. All these facets interlink, and involve a process of recognising the existence of unequal social relations in society and a commitment to not replicating them within the research relationships.

An anti-oppressive paradigm should also be seen as a tool to facilitate marginalized groups in constructing oppositional politics and action to oppose social inequality, as its central tenets critique a dominant system of social stratification and seek ways of changing it. Therefore it should be explicitly political in terms of being part of a broader project, rather than just as a means of creating detached 'knowledge', and should consider who actually benefits from the research and whether change actually occurs as a result of it (Humphries, Mertens and Truman:2000). In terms of this study the politics are threefold. Firstly it is a challenge to academia in terms of what constitutes knowledge, what is worthy of study, and what methods are considered valid and rigorous. It will seek to challenge the trend of what is historically considered the acceptable presence of lesbian, Black or disability issues within mainstream academia, which according to Carol T. Tully has meant emphasising aetiology, psychological functioning, social functioning, and clinical intervention, while representatives of the group being studied have only been involved as researcher in a minority of cases (1995). Furthermore, the role of the creative arts within the methodology will aim to push the limits of previously accepted creative output within the research process and create a new



framework to conceptualise this. Thirdly, the study will examine power relations, explicitly identify situations whereby these are experienced as oppressive within the participants' lives, and seek to empower the participants by making the workings of power more transparent, challenging oppressive social attitudes, and involving the participants in the study in an egalitarian and collaborative way. The study will seek to explore the articulation of subjectivising power through the identities which are enfranchised, and experiment with alternative forms of subjectivity which meet the participants' needs more adequately.

### Self.

I began my Ph.D. interested in the ways in which access to the lesbian community was policed from within, which I experienced as a set of conditions of membership organised around appearance, values, behaviour and attitude. I began wondering to what extent anyone else shared my frustrations with this situation, and what if any strategies they had developed to cope. Clara Greed, in discussing her intense involvement with her study of women quantity surveyors states,

“...I simply have an urge to make more sense of both my own personal life and the urban environment in which I live, and also a concomitant curiosity about how others manage.”(1990:151)

This interest with self *and* others informed the way in which I approached the study. However, as the study progressed and I completed the first stage of the fieldwork, I began to mediate my intense personal involvement, and allow the participants to dictate the areas of interest and concern to be pursued. This allowed the study to broaden significantly, taking on board the realisation that different women will have alternative priorities based on the sources of oppression they may experience. Thus I expanded my reading to cover other aspects of social stratification, and re-thought the paradigm which would be necessary to carry out such a study. This process was very valuable in terms of moving my own learning along as it made me confront other aspects of my own life which caused incongruity, and to widen my understanding of the *processes* of power and



oppression as well as the particulars. This was also beneficial to the study, as it led to a new way of working with the participants, and a more challenging approach to both the data and the process of carrying out the research. Beth Humphries and Carole Truman argued that the anti-discriminatory mode of researcher involvement should comprise...

“...achieving a conscious partiality with those who are marginalized or invisible, or whose experiences have been distorted by traditional research.”  
(1994:1)

It was at this point that I began to seriously question what conscious partiality might comprise in my study, and how exactly to re-negotiate my own involvement in the study in relation to the ownership of the participants.

On this subject, Helen Roberts (1981) discussed the Feminist employment of reflexive sociology, whereby sociologists take their own experiences seriously and incorporate them into their work, and it was this type of approach that I was initially drawn to. Liz Stanley (1990) reported exploring similar concerns, and suggested that a framework around which to structure one's involvement in a study would be 'conscious reflexivity'. Diane Reay states that reflexivity is

“...a continual consideration of the ways in which the researcher's own social identity and values affect the data gathered and the picture of the social world produced...”(1996:60)

According to Liz Stanley this involves the researcher paying close analytical detail to the processes of her active role, and being explicit about this through the presentation of results. Therefore, what I initially hoped reflexivity would do for this study would be to facilitate reflection on my own involvement, to ensure that avenues which the participants wanted to explore both in terms of content and methodology were not blocked off by my own subconscious limitations and agendas. I believe I began with the assumption that doing research with other women within the context of a reflexive approach would allow me to acknowledge the structured differences between myself and participants, that these would be acknowledged and explored as part of the interrogation of the deployment of power, and thus not become negatively constructed in the research



process. This assumption was exploded by Rahel Wasserfall (1993) who argues that reflexivity does not guarantee that when differences become marked that there will be any simple or straightforward way of resolving them. This then complicates issues of ownership and control where key decisions may have to be made within the study. Wasserfall argues that there is a weak and a strong reading of reflexivity. The weak reading, she argues, comprises the aspects outlined above. The strong reading, on the other hand, involves a deconstruction of a) the authority of the researcher, particularly at the 'writing up' stage, and b) the power inequalities in the field, and also illuminates the theoretical and political context of contestation within which knowledge is produced and consumed. The strong reading attempts to create more equal research relationships by looking seriously at the issues. Reflexivity, she argues, cannot avoid distortion in every situation, and cannot resolve all the issues once differences between researcher and participants become marked.

It was Wasserfall's strong reading of reflexivity which I decided to pursue, as I became more aware of the implications of the Postmodern conception of knowledge for the *process* of carrying out the research. Wasserfall's strong reading seemed compatible with the Postmodern conception of knowledge, whereby 'resonance' would be the key concept in the presentation of results in the thesis. This involved then thinking around the author-ity of the researcher, and lead to a deeper interrogation of the purposes of consulting participants about the developing conclusions. I became interested in making my voice merely one amongst many speaking of the significance of what was emerging, and to deconstruct the privilege of the position of 'researcher'. Thus Wasserfall's model of reflexivity facilitated this process, as it allowed me to de-centralise my own voice as researcher, and replace it with a discursive space, into which I slotted the next process of participant consultation. The intention was to create a sufficiently ambiguous 'text' about my interpretations of the data to allow the participants in more explicitly as co-creators of meaning, and to encourage their taking on the authority of the role of defining the meaning of the text, and thus the meaning of the study. Thus while I started from a position of intense involvement and complete control, I worked towards mediating that approach to recognise the participants as equal partners in the construction of knowledge.



Therefore, while my own identifications have changed from the ‘lesbian woman artist’ which I identified as at the time of advertising for research participants to something much more complex, particularly within the categories of sex, gender and sexuality this is mirrored in the process of making the focus of the research more complex, moving away from simplistic identifications along binary opposites. However, the extent to which the study influenced my identifications, or my identifications influenced the study is similarly complex as both occurred simultaneously through reflection on experience, the literature and participants’ data. The relinquishing of strong public identities however, facilitated the gradual de-centring of my voice as the researcher, through the recognition of the other realities which are possible when restrictive roles and identities are rejected. It was as a result of being open to new ideas and opportunities that I found new opportunities and directions both for myself and for the study.

### **Ethics.**

The main ethical considerations within the study were the ways in which the anti-oppressive paradigm would be translated into principles and procedures. While a main principle of the study is that of inclusion, I came to understand that the very act of *participation* needs also to be regulated by a framework which shares anti-oppressive principles. Thus power within the research relationships and the process of study require consideration, as do the ways in which participants will be protected; the ways in which their data will be used and how control of this is negotiated.

The potential for power inequalities between researcher and participants was one of the first ethical issues I considered within the study. Working within a developing anti-oppressive paradigm meant that while differences should be acknowledged and valued and normalisation resisted, to facilitate inclusion, the quality of the *process of participation* should also be considered. The role of the participants and their experiences of participation were also a central feature of the study being ‘anti-oppressive’. I was concerned that the relationships between researcher and participants should be empowering, and for the experience of participation to be constructive and



beneficial. One aspect of this I struggled with was whether the research would aim to be participatory or emancipatory, and how this would fit with the award of Ph.D. John Swain (1995) described the difference between participatory and emancipatory research as being based within the *degree* of control which the participants have in the study. Participatory research, he argues, involves 'shared control' of the study by participants and the researcher, while the balance of this control will vary from study to study. In emancipatory research, the 'quality' of the control is central, as the participants use the researcher as a skilled tool to carry out their work. Decisions rest with the participants, and the study follows their agenda. While the participants may find participatory research empowering, this suggests an individual response and outcome, while emancipation involves a group of empowered individuals working together to fight social inequality. I felt that both approaches could be judged to be anti-oppressive, but I struggled with the implications of an emancipatory model being used within a process which was ultimately about the award of Ph.D. for the researcher. I felt it would be much more honest of me to accept that my study was limited to a participatory approach where the aim of individual empowerment was key, than to attempt to resolve the conflict I perceived in using an emancipatory model.

However, the key for me in terms of the participatory approach being anti-oppressive, was the **quality** of the process which the participants would be involved in. Thus it was important that the research relationships developed in non-hierarchical ways, that any power imbalances be acknowledged, and ways of incorporating this into the study be found. Thus the developing relationships became very important in the study, and the process of reflexivity was used to reflect upon this. The first interview had been prefixed by the sharing of information about myself and the roots of the study. However, the list of open ended questions used at this interview were entirely from my frame of reference, and this was the first point at which the power differential between the researcher and the participants became marked. In her response to the questions, Joy actually commented on the structure of the interview, saying

"I feel... questions can be intrusive, not everyone will want to answer questions, err, I, I remember a long time ago that one supervisor who I went to who was an existential supervisor, he felt that err, one should not ask direct



questions, err and in some ways, err I've found these questions naïve, err in other ways I've found them *extremely* compassionate, erm, so, it's very difficult I feel to, draw a conclusion about conflicting sets of expectations."

Thus from this point on I tried to use unstructured interviews, and to base discussions around my feedback to the data previously gathered. Out of this I developed a strong belief in the importance of reporting back to participants about my developing conclusions about the data, and this is supported by John Swain (1995) who argues that the purpose of this is to both give feedback and to act as a catalyst for further discussion. It was this method which I firmly came to believe in as a key to quality participation as this facilitated the process of 'critical evaluation' on the process of the study (Swain:1995).

In terms of protecting the participants, I created a confidentiality agreement (appendix L) for all the participants, which was open to negotiation at the first interview, and throughout the research process. This set out how the data would be collected, who would see it, how it would be used, and the rights of the participants to control the ways in which their data was presented. None of the participants asked for the confidentiality agreement to be amended in any way, all seemed quite happy to trust me, while none seemed immediately concerned to choose a pseudonym. I was quite surprised by this at the time, probably because through all the reading I had done around ethics within Feminist methodology, a significant emphasis was placed on protecting the participants and ensuring that their contributions were not exploited. However, this lack of concern around ethics, and the willingness to trust was experienced and reported by Janet Finch (1984) and contributed to her warning tone about one's potential as a Feminist researcher to be oppressive. She states,

"I have also emerged from interviews with the feeling that my interviewees need to know how to protect themselves from people like me. They have often revealed very private parts of their lives in return for what must be, in the last resort, very flimsy guarantees of confidentiality..."(1984:80)

I was so intent on working anti-oppressively, and yet beginning to believe from the literature that I could not avoid being oppressive that I carried a substantial degree of fear



and paranoia into my first interviews. This was compounded by Finch's supposition that women's social status, the special nature of the all-women research relationship, and women's general lack of opportunities to talk about themselves could all make a Feminist approach potentially more oppressive than the mainstream Positivist one. Stacey (1988) agreed stating,

“Indeed the irony I now perceive is that ethnographic method exposes subjects to far greater danger and exploitation than do more positivist, abstract, and “masculinist” research methods. The greater the intimacy, the apparent mutuality of the researcher/ researched relationship, the greater is the danger.”(1988:24)

The participants' lack of concern over these issues contrasted sharply with my hyper-awareness, and seemed to increase my own feelings of oppressiveness through their incognizance. Following the first set of interviews, before I began getting feed back from the participants, I felt that I was carrying the full weight of responsibility to protect them because they hadn't understood the need to protect themselves.

The quality of the research relationships was a key feature of the process of participation being anti-oppressive, and thus I was keen that this did not make the participants vulnerable in other ways. Person-centred counselling skills of active listening, unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence were used to establish dialogues with participants which were non-judgmental and encouraged the participants to construct their own realities in the conversations we had. I believed this was empowering in terms of facilitating the participants to tell their own stories and to have these validated. However, I was aware that these skills also encouraged the establishment of trust and the safety of disclosure which have their own inherent dangers. Participants might find themselves getting into areas which they had not anticipated talking about, or later regretting speaking so freely. I was therefore keen to put boundaries around this process to make it safer, and thus committed to co-authoring the thesis with the participants in terms of negotiating their approval of the ways in which their data were later represented.

Many criticisms of the validity of researchers' claims to use empowering methodology focus on the stage of **data interpretation and analysis**, as it is at this stage



that researchers tend to have almost total control and ownership, and whereby they make meaning out of data provided by other people. My ethics at this crucial stage therefore included a commitment to avoid appropriation, re-inscription of oppressive stereotypes, and misrepresentation. However, merely committing to this was not enough. Strategies to facilitate and monitor the application of such a commitment had to be developed, and one such system was to consult the participants on their response to my interpretation of the data, and to invite them to evaluate it and to propose their own readings. After the first stage of data analysis this was done through the creation of a conceptual map whereby the conclusions I had drawn from the data, and written up in a lengthy chapter were summarised in a more user friendly format, and fed back to the participants for comments and evaluation. However, when I found that this was not a particularly successful method, I began to look at other ways of reporting back to participants which might encourage their more active and meaningful participation. This became a central theme within the study as it developed as the focus for explorations around constructing narratives, challenging oppressive constructions of identities and negotiating authority between researcher and participants. Thus while the principles underpinning the ethics of the study were fairly consistent throughout, the process of implementing these was dynamic, as I responded to the challenges thrown up by the developments of the study.

## **Conclusion.**

In conclusion then, at this stage of the study I was developing my own understanding of ‘methodology’ and what it *meant* within the study. The process of consultation was taking on increasing significance in terms of co-authoring processes, ethical practices and paradigmatic development, and thus the second phase of data analysis and presentation, and consultation around findings was becoming crucial. The study was developing into an examination of subjectivity and social inclusion, and these issues were increasingly becoming mirrored in the act of participating in the research process. This fusion of content and methodology lead to an increasingly in-depth analysis of ‘methodology’ and ‘knowledge’ and the processes by which both come to have meaning.



29/4/00

I'm fine with writing the practical stuff. This I can deal with. It's like a welcome break from the intensity of the rest of the stuff. The month or so we've spent on this has been wonderful as a time to reflect on other stuff, to get my head around it and to calm down a bit. I've re-built my defences and feel secure again. It's like having a stable base and from here I can wander off and explore more exciting possibilities, always knowing I've got somewhere safe to return to. I feel dead clever when I realise this is what Amber did in this last chapter; creating a stable basis from which to explore the possibilities of art making. I share this insight with her and she's really pleased I'm making connections.

But can I tell her

how many connections

I'm really making?

30/4/00

The last I heard you had started a new job... I'm about to ask 'do they know about you?' (I always worried about your vulnerability...) but I stop myself and wonder... do they know what? What's to know? I think of myself. Does Amber know about me? And when I realise I wouldn't know what to tell her I realise why I'm enjoying doing this work with her so much, but hating it at the same time. I know it might create a new identity for me, but at the same time I might not like it. I swing between these extremes all the time.



Just reading back over the start of this letter I know I'm probably losing you completely, because I'm stopping and starting all the time, and always tempted to storm on to the end before we've finished the middle. I think I must have been doing this with Amber too lately, because she got me totally into just looking at the paintings she did and told me not to worry about anything else... about words, labels, identities, anything, and to just look and feel and enjoy and live. It kind of grounded me in now and loosened the strings I'd tied ferociously tight to the future and the ending of this thesis. Amber said not to 'invest too much' in what I assume or hope is coming at the end, because she'd hate me to be disappointed. I'm not sure what she meant by that. Anyway, just looking at the paintings was good for me, and I got totally hooked into 'Denial' and to a lesser extent 'Stability' (I'll put copies in). We worked together on the explanation of where they came from and the thinking behind the idea, but I think to really understand you have to see them.



## Chapter 6.

### The Second Phase of Data Analysis.

This chapter will consist of a description of the way in which I approached data analysis through engaging in my own art making processes, and a presentation of the **findings** in the form of seven paintings.

I began the second stage of data analysis by trying to immerse myself in the data in much the same way as I had after the first round of interviews. I read and re-read the transcripts, listened to the tape recordings again, made copious notes and drew diagrams and doodles. However, I began to get bogged down with the data and concerns over how to present it back to the participants once it was analysed, and thus I began using my own art making as a means of freeing up the possibilities of what I was thinking, and letting go of the security of working in a recognised way. Instead I began to respond to the data in images. From this point onward I worked with the data exclusively in images, and built up a portfolio of work which explored the ideas in the data in the same way. I both worked symbolically and figuratively, to explore the issues and relationships the participants had explored in their interviews, and this became a very constructive means of feeling my way through the more complex areas. I thus used more intuition and interpretative reasoning (Best:1992), and allowed the learnings which came through from the developing images to inform the direction which the art work took. This process enabled me to discover new ways of looking at the data, and at the same time new understanding developed. The art making was very exploratory at this stage and I created lots of sketches rather than finished pieces of work. This allowed for provisional conclusions to remain tentative and open to change, as the dynamic nature of the process necessitated this flexibility.

Using art making as part of methodology was based within David Best's philosophy (1992) of the arts in education. He argued for the centrality of the arts in the curriculum, by challenging the assumption that the feelings used in the creation and reception of art



works are purely subjective. Alternatively he put forward a tripartite theory of the arts as an important medium for learning, by arguing,

1. that artistic feelings involve understanding and cognition
2. for the importance of interpretative reasoning in understanding and evaluating in the arts, and
3. that reasons can change understanding, and with it feeling.

Best thus argues that the potential for learning in the arts is extremely powerful, and it was this potential which I wanted to harness in my study. To explore Best's first argument, he claims that the role of the arts in education is continuously de-valued by the assumption that the arts are purely subjective and therefore not answerable to cognition. On the contrary, Best argues that feelings themselves are rational as the response to a particular understanding of their object. He states,

“For example, since I am afraid of snakes, my feeling will be very different if I take an object under my desk to be a rope from what it would be if I take it to be a snake. There is a logical relation between my feeling, and my understanding or cognition of the object. It would make no sense to suppose that I could experience that kind of fear – of snakes – if I take the object to be a rope... that is, it makes no sense to suppose that one could normally have a certain kind of emotional feeling about a wholly inappropriate object.”  
(1992:6)

Thus artistic feelings are cognitive, as they represent a rational response to their object, be it a painting, production, poem or song. However, Best goes on to argue that because people will have different understandings of the same artistic object, this is used to de-value the quality of such responses and they are labelled as ‘purely subjective’. However, this is challenged through the introduction of interpretative reasoning as an alternative to deductive and inductive reasoning. Interpretative reasoning, Best argues allows for multiple competing interpretations of the same object to exist simultaneously, and leads to new insights and understandings without monolithic Truths being imposed. He states,

“The most appropriate way to respond to the common conviction that reason is incompatible with feeling is to deny that the deductive and inductive are the



only or even the most important kinds of reasoning. Interpretative reasoning involves, for instance, attempting to show a situation in a different light, and this may involve not only a different interpretation or conception, but also a different evaluation. It is important to recognise that unlike the deductive reasoning typical of, for instance, syllogistic logic, interpretative reasons do not lead inexorably to universally valid conclusions. There may be sound reasons given for conflicting interpretations and evaluations, and there may be no way in which it is possible to resolve such differences.” (1992:8)

This was particularly resonant with my approach to this study, as the potentially conflicting views on the same phenomena expressed by the participants was something which I was determined to keep intact, to explore the diversity of experiences and the range of interpretations and conclusions each participant reached. Furthermore, in using my own art making as a means of understanding, representing and consulting participants about conclusions drawn I was keen for individual responses to the images to begin to define the study, thus interpretative reasoning offered a means of working with multiplicity and difference.

Best completes his argument by illustrating how we can be educated about our feelings. He argues that, as feeling is rational it is open to change, and thus as reasons are given to change our understanding of an object, so too can our feelings change. Thus a change in feeling comes to express a new understanding. In terms of using art work within the study then, paintings constructed out of my understanding of the data may change the way a participant understands her own experience, and as the understanding changes, so too the feelings about that experience may change. Thus a participant may have explored issues of gender, power and control in her relationship with a partner in her interview, but by engaging with the paintings may come to understand the quality of that tension and define it more precisely. So too in the process of creation, by struggling to represent the quality of empowerment I may come to know better what that *means*. Best states,

“Because of the possibility of emotional experience through involvement with the arts, one can achieve insights into and understanding of life which may be more powerful than any alternative. Through the arts one can come not only to understand a situation but, by involving oneself in analogous experience, *to feel what it amounts to.*” (1992:196) (my emphasis)



Furthermore, at the stage of consultation the participants' responses to the paintings might offer reasons for me to look at them and understand them differently, and to therefore come to understand the images and also data more sophisticatedly. Similarly, the presence of other participants' data within the images may illuminate a level of understanding on an issue for another participant which she had never before considered. Best states,

“While it is true, in one sense, reasoning cannot improve eyesight and hearing, it is crucial to recognise that it can open up possibilities of perception which would otherwise remain closed... One's attention may be drawn to the significance of previously unrecognised subtleties of a work of art which suffuse the whole work with a new meaning and value, yet, from a purely physical point of view, one sees nothing which one did not see before.”  
(1992:35)

Thus by engaging with art works through the processes of creation and reception, we can meet with reasons which change our understanding, which in turn may lead to a change in feeling. I found that developing ideas in a visual way lead me to see in new ways as the images developed in unexpected directions and offered new perspectives on the data in question. For instance, in one painting the way in which a particular colour altered the feel of the relationship between the two central characters was remarkable, and thus experimentation with colour to see the relationship in different ways lead to a closer examination of the data to ascertain the precise nature of the relationship. Experimenting with the colour enabled me to think more deeply about the quality of the relationship, and to understand what 'dependency' might *mean* in a relationship.

The art work progressed in many directions due to the number of issues being developed, but gradually I saw a pattern emerging whereby issues began to become clustered together in terms of understanding their interrelationships, and the ways these might be presented within visual representations. Thus I began to develop key ideas within the sketches I had been producing, and moved towards working basic ideas up into more sophisticated ideas and representations. Thus a set of seven paintings emerged which were more highly developed and represented what I felt my findings to be after



this stage of data analysis. The use of a visual language to understand and express ideas and issues was extremely effective in terms of opening up 'other' ways of knowing in terms of a process of knowledge production, and of knowing 'differently' in terms of understanding the issues. This fit well with the aims of the study, as the use of interpretative reasoning allowed previously oppressively defined identities to be envisioned differently, thus pursuing Foucault's project of refusing who we have been defined as and instead exploring what else we can be. Johanna Oksala states,

“When identity is understood not as a metaphysical essence, but as a cultural construction, the implication is that it can be conceived differently. Identities can be re-shaped, mutated and subverted. Categories and boundaries can be crossed and blurred. Self can be understood not as a profound discovery, but as a playful creation, admitting a multitude of acts and desires.” (1998:45)

Thus art making was a liberating media to use in terms of coming to know other possibilities without having to come to prescriptive conclusions.

I had at this stage made the decision to use the paintings as the means of reporting back conclusions to the participants, to explore whether this visual medium would facilitate more successful consultation. I was very enthusiastic about sharing the images with the participants, as I believed they intervened in the process of negotiation between myself and the participants in ways which the 'map' had failed to do. The paintings were quite ambiguous, and thus potentially offered wider parameters for responses than the map had done. The potential to use interpretative reasoning was apparent, as many equally valid interpretations could exist simultaneously, and in fact it was this potential for differences to be articulated and acknowledged which formed a corner stone of the study. Thus I wondered whether the participants would therefore be more able to challenge their construction and impose their own meanings and definitions on them. I was excited by the qualities of polyphony and polysemy in the paintings as the voices of the participants were present simultaneously across many of the images, rather than there being a single image dedicated to each of them. This presentation of multiple perspectives within the one image linked to the images' ambiguity, as there was space for multiple interpretations to be made of the same image. Furthermore I believed that *my* understanding and interpretations, embodied within the paintings were less prominent



and prescriptive than they possibly were in the map, and I considered the possibilities this might offer for the participants to assume the dominant voice in the development of conclusions.

A similar approach can be found in Jim Mienczakowski's use of ethno-drama as research methodology (2000), whereby health consumers' stories are presented to audiences of health professionals and students in the medium of ethnographically-derived theatre. The opportunity to explore meanings is present at the end of each performance, and audience feed-back is then re-negotiated with participants (informants) to create a newly adapted version of the performance. Mienczakowski states,

“During the forum sessions informants are able to reflect upon the actor's interpretation and representation of self (Turner 1986; Conquergood 1988, 1991) and audiences, in general, may realise how particular social and mental health issues are experienced...

At all times, consensus with the contributors is paramount (Habermas 1971, 1984, 1987) and the scripts are permanently subject to amendment and revision to ensure that the representations made are recognisable to, and offer the insights desired by, informant groups.” (2000:128/9)

This process had resonance with my own way of working, in terms of consulting with participants about the meanings available within the art works, and taking on board their comments to refine and develop the conclusions being drawn.

Visual images have been used within research before, by for instance Gillian Bendelow (1993) in her project about gendered notions of pain. She explains the way in which she used pairs of images depicting experiences of pain to engage participants in discussion about their own personal experiences and views. These images were paintings and photographs generated within western culture and selected by the researcher, for instance *The Scream* by Edvard Munch. Bendelow reports using images as a means of getting in touch with the “more elusive dimensions of pain” (1993:217), and encouraging the participants to define pain for themselves. She reports that using this process among other approaches within the study added depth and texture to the data, which involved valuing personal experiences and interpretations, emphasising that there were no right answers, and facilitating the opportunity to explore the subject of pain in a new way. While my study differs in that the images were created by myself out of the data gathered



from interviews with the participants, the purpose is similar, as I was also very interested in ways of reaching the 'more elusive' aspects of the participants' responses to the conclusions being generated about the study.

The paintings totalled seven and were untitled. All were acrylic on canvas and averaged 5' by 4' in size. The participants saw enlarged scanned photographs rather than the actual paintings which was regrettable, but their very size and nature made it difficult to share the paintings in any other way. The participants who were still involved (Antonia and Joy) lived out of the local area, thus an exhibition was also an impractical way of allowing them to see the actual art works at this time. The participants received a set of the paintings by post about a week before the interview was scheduled, to give them time to look at them and reflect upon them. They were also sent an explanation of what they were, how they had been created and how I saw them being used within the study. At the interview I asked each participant to tell me about their responses to the paintings, emphasising that there were no right or wrong answers, and that I was more interested in their own perceptions of the work than in them guessing what I meant the work to be about.

The paintings are presented overleaf, and they bear names given to them by one of the participants during the interview where she talked about them. This is not to privilege her view of them, but merely acts as a means of identifying which image is being talked about at which point. However, as the names given to cultural representations are often used as a means by which the audience constructs the meanings of a piece of work, the reader is invited to consider what labels they themselves would attach to each image if they had been a participant, rather than relying on the universal validity of the names given.



Stability.



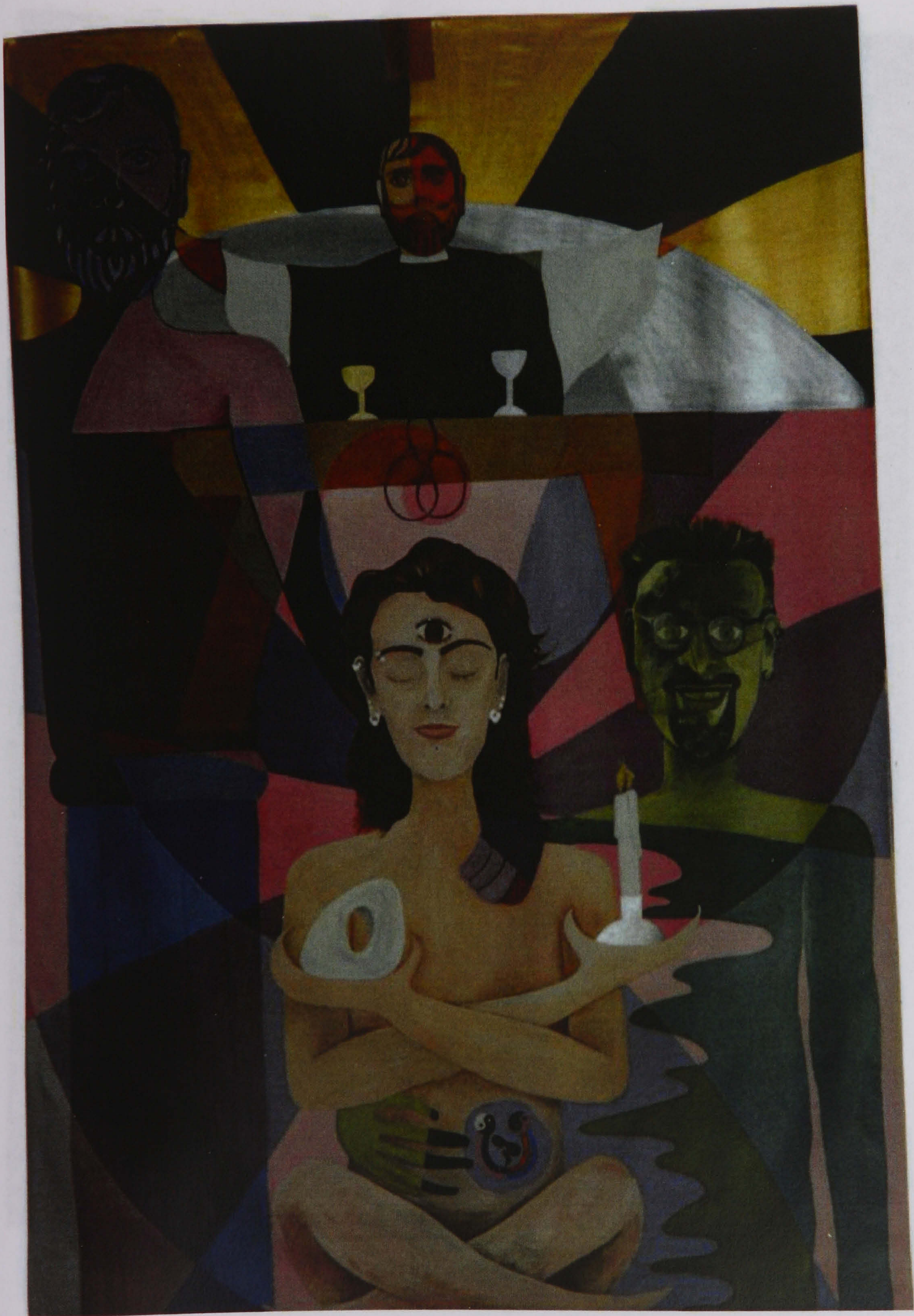


Key to Love.





Contradiction.





Denial.





Protection.





Jigsaw.





## Symbols.





8/5/00

The recuperation stage continues... more work which gives me a break from the really intense, in your face, self reflection stuff and instead allows me to process it at my own pace. I'm feeling quite strong. We work relentlessly, albeit with good laughs along the way, and suddenly Amber is in her stride, she's hit top form and there is no stopping her. The words run off her tongue like the kisses she showers on her partner when he gets home, and we run with it. We stop occasionally to eat, but the stress which caused Amber to binge previously, lifts with her newly found confidence and we've both lost weight... you can see my Abs again, which I love!

Amber and I had some fab debates about the paintings, and I told her some stuff about me. Nothing really major yet, but just some stuff to test out how cool she is. She's cool. I showed her some photos, like the one where you and I were going to the Mardi Gras parade, and Chris was pouring tequila into Dave's Stetson. They were both laughing and I was painting my eyes in front of the big mirror in your bedroom, the one with the angora all round it. We loved that photo. You said I looked like Garbo. I told Amber to look at it carefully because it was a very special photo. She said she thought I looked like Garbo too.

10/5/00

We've been working on a chapter about the issues which came up for Amber in using art making as a form of methodology and initially I thought it was a waste of valuable words and I tried to tell her. She



wasn't happy, but did concede the next day that she had taken notice and thought about what I had said. Then she explained that it was important because of the scrutiny the approach would get, and to do it justice in terms of fully explaining and justifying why it was seen to be appropriate. I kept hold of this bit because something told me it was quite important for my own search, on some level.



## Chapter 7.

### An Exploration of the Issues Raised by Including Art Making within the Study.

#### Introduction.

A key feature which emerged from the first wave of fieldwork was the importance of reporting back to participants to encourage them to challenge conclusions drawn, to have more ownership over the meanings made within the study. Following the use of the conceptual 'map' to report back my findings from the first stage of fieldwork, I was disappointed at the apparent compliance of the participants to accept my conclusions. I thus began to consider the role of my own art making within data collection, analysis and dissemination of results, and whether this could be used to further enfranchise the participants to control the meanings being made of their data. These considerations were very important, because as the central story of the research was becoming increasingly about 'participation' and subjectivity, the use of art making had to be commensurate with this, in order for it to be more than just a colourful interlude in the process of the research. Thus I began to question to what extent the Arts were participatory, and to what extent that participation could be empowering. I thus got into debates about culture and knowledge, and how each is constructed in relation to social structures of unequal power relations. I was also intrigued by Foucault's unification of the processes of signification with the transformation of human being to subject (1984). I began investigating to what extent marginalized groups have used the arts as a means of articulating a more emancipated experience for themselves, and the issues they have confronted along the way. I was keen to understand the processes I was going through while analysing the data through my own art making, and the tensions I experienced as I tried to formulate and represent conclusions through visual media. Thus the art making and the grappling with the issues in the literature developed side by side, and the following chapter is an exploration of the issues I struggled with in working this way,



how these related to debates in the field, and the ways in which I sought to resolve tensions and keep the study moving forward.

In organising this chapter I will refer to any cultural artefact as a 'text' (to use the Postmodern term), regardless of whether this is a video, poem, painting, installation or production, but the main examples I will draw on to illustrate my points will be from the visual arts, as this is my main area of expertise. Furthermore, as my art work and this writing developed together, examples will be drawn from my own practice to illustrate the ways in which I engaged with the debates and found resolutions to tensions. This chapter will be structured under the following headings:

1. The Arts and Power.

This will examine Liberal Humanist and Postmodern conceptions of culture, before looking at the relationship between art and ideology. I will then look at the ways in which the dominant cultural aesthetic impacts upon creation and reception of cultural products.

2. Working as an Artist.

This section will examine the potential through the arts for self construction and representation and whether representation can avoid restrictive, monolithic definitions of identity, and assist in the construction of more empowering notions of self.

### The Arts and Power.

This section will begin with an overview of culture, in terms of Liberal Humanist and Postmodern perspectives. I will then consider the role of the aesthetic in the construction of a dominant culture, and I will look at the relationship between art and ideology.



## An overview of culture.

Williams defines culture as “The signifying system through which... a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.” (1981:13). Thus the process of **signification**, i.e. the construction of meaning within (amongst other things) cultural artefacts, and the **social order** in question are key features of any discussion of culture. My intention in the study was to analyse the participants’ data through the creation of visual images which would allow me to think and feel differently about the material. I then intended to express the learnings and interpretations I had made in formalised paintings, and use these to feedback my conclusions to the participants, and to consult them about their validity. In terms of seeking to analyse and re-present data in visual form, I realised that I needed to enter the signifying system, and explore and *challenge* the social order. Finding a way in was not straightforward, and this was evidenced by many Feminist artists and theorists who lamented the ease with which their oppositional texts became recuperated into the mainstream (Wilton:1995; Meskimmon:1996). I became aware that I needed to understand the system and the ways in which effective challenges *could* be made. My aims therefore were to interfere with the signification of the social order, while communicating, reproducing, experiencing and exploring alternative realities, i.e. those expressed within the participants’ data.

However, Modern and Postmodern cultural theorists disagreed about the shape of culture as a signifying system, and each offered a different interpretation of the mechanisms of the system and potential ways in to it, to articulate alternative realities. The Modernist perspective was underpinned by the philosophy of Liberal Humanism, which stresses the central essence of the individual and the innate potentiality to self actualise. Culture is viewed as the path to Enlightenment, whereby human nature is realised through the development of intellectual and moral life. Education is central in transmitting the ‘best’ ideas and values of the age, while the standard set to achieve is that of perfection, within which beauty, morality, virtue and intellect are upheld as key values (Jordan and Weedon:1995). In terms of culture, this philosophy supported the emergence of a body of canonised art works, set apart from the efforts of artisans and craftspeople, and titled ‘Great Art’. It also led to the creators of this ‘Great’ art being



labelled 'Genius', and the power to transcend the body and create something spiritual was attributed to this mode of creation (Griffith: 1999).

As a disabled lesbian woman at the turn of the new millennium, Nicola Griffith examines this model of culture in terms of the impact it has upon her as a writer. She traces its origins back to Platonic and Aristotelian traditions which posited the soul as superior to the flesh and explains that this was taken on by St. Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Descartes, and modified or contested in various ways. The conclusion, in terms of the relationship between God, the Arts, religion and spirituality always remained that only those capable of transcending the flesh (those labelled 'Genius') were capable of producing Great art. She says

“Great Art, ran conventional wisdom, is produced by Great Artists, who are great because they transcend the flesh, reach beyond the physical to the spiritual. Except (what a surprise) where women were concerned. “You women” we were told, “are too close to your animal nature. You can’t transcend it, so you can’t produce art.” No matter what else got rewritten, *that* particular legacy was never questioned.

This general mindset, only slightly mutated, is with us today. Our conventional wisdom says that Great Literature is produced by Great Writers. Great Writers are those who transcend the mundane and speak the great universal truth.” (1999:224)

Other groups in addition to women have traditionally and are currently tied to their bodies and defined by their physicality, such as those with impairments, and those racially perceived as Other. Furthermore, for any person falling into these categories, the process of ageing will often add another dimension to their inescapable corporeal nature. Thus Liberal Humanism spawned a very elitist, exclusive notion of culture, which those from the margins have found difficult to penetrate (Streete:1990; Jarrett:1996). Its canonised products claim to speak of universal Truth which in turn reduces or denies the value of other art works, created by those unable to be considered Great (Jordan and Weedon:1995). This then seemed an inappropriate model of culture to attempt to infiltrate within this study, as its central tenets appeared to reject the validity of the participants’ experiences as the basis for art making.



However, the Modern and Postmodern models of culture and their attendant aesthetics are central to determining the potential of the Arts to disrupt dominant ideology, and Modernist theorists retain a belief in the emancipatory potential of artefacts constructed under this aesthetic. For example, the Liberal Humanist conception of culture, embodied in Modernist aesthetics, asserts the non-political character of art, positing the art work as an hermetically sealed, self referring object which is detached from, and autonomous of the material conditions of everyday life (Johnson:1990). Thus art works are viewed as transcendent of reality, commenting on the universal Truth of the human condition. However, as the Modernist aesthetic comes from Enlightenment thinking, within its parameters is the hope for a free, rational social life, characterised by the emancipated personality (Johnson:1990). The role of the Arts in achieving this goal is characterised as the pursuit of the ideals of beauty and 'Great' ideas. Thus Art works generated within this aesthetic may be challenging and rebellious, albeit contained within the context of a detached commentary on generalised themes and not grounded in reality. However, for some Feminist commentators, this is viewed as an advantage, as it creates critical distance. Pauline Johnson says

“On this account, the modernist thesis of the purity of the aesthetic is able to sustain an essentially critical perspective on the present for it is precisely this disengagement of the work from the interests, commitments and norms of the everyday which enables the autonomous work of art to articulate an alternative, critical reality.” (1990:104)

Criticism within this aesthetic therefore takes the form of a lofty idealism; a distant nirvana to strive towards which brings the inadequacies of the present into sharper relief. This then raised the question of whether addressing social inequalities through direct critique of them, or by the use of abstraction and generalisation would be the best approach to take in the art making, and this then influenced the ways in which the participants' data were presented.

I thus considered how a Postmodern approach would facilitate the achievement of my aims. The elitism of a Modern aesthetic, and the separation of high 'Great' culture from the 'popular' culture created by Others was challenged by Postmodernism in its lament of the originally subversive potential of Modernist culture, now canonised as the



classical standard to be attained. The co-option of Modern art into the elite canon of Great art led to a Postmodern re-evaluation of popular culture and a challenge to the legitimacy of the constructed divide between high and popular culture. Other distinctions such as those which separated the art forms into discrete categories were critiqued, and this led to collaborations between artists and musicians resulting in both the music and the packaging being perceived as the art work, thus disrupting traditional thinking. The role and identity of the artist began to blur as collaborations, and referencing other well known cultural texts within a work, called into question the concept of the artist as individual Genius and sole creator of a text (Story:1993). Thus the previous mystique of creation came under scrutiny and the centrality of the artist to the text was debated. This model seemed to offer me greater potential for formulating a strategy to intervene in the processes of signification through which culture was constructed, as it contained an inherent challenge to the hierarchical ordering of texts based on the 'cult of personality' of the artist. This interrogation of the authority of the artist mirrored the processes already started within the study to replace the authority of the researcher with that of the participants to define the meanings of the research.

Culture as constructed by Postmodern philosophy challenges the existence of a universal Truth which can be found through a process of transcendence and expressed in Great art works. While Poststructuralism is concerned with the processes by which things come to mean what they do, Postmodernism takes this forward into the struggle to fix and popularise meaning in order for one group to have its meanings validated (Jordan and Weedon:1995). Contestation over meaning is seen as contesting power, and testing, breaking and reconfiguring the relations between groups divided by the boundaries of social stratification. Thus there are no universal values to strive to attain, nor overarching criteria for cultural criticism. Instead, creation is seen within the context of an interchange of meaning, whereby texts will reference each other in multitudinous ways, creating networks of meaning, within which readers will be variously situated. Thus the process is viewed more dynamically and involves the artist, the text itself and the audience, while the meaning of a text is not assumed to be hermetically sealed but constructed through an interchange between the three (Henderson:1992). Thus knowledge is considered partial and situated, discursively produced and particular to the



time, place and context within which it is created. This, it is argued enfranchises those traditionally rooted in their physicality to create and express their own 'truths', and validates their conclusions without recourse to concepts such as 'Genius'. Griffith says

"The conventional wisdom is nonsense. There is no universal truth. There are only many different and individual truths. It's my belief that we write about what interests, fascinates and obsesses us. We hope that by doing so we can show our readers part of our world view, help others to understand our own particular truth. Who we are - what we have done, how we have been treated and how we feel about that – determines our truth and, therefore, what we want to write about."(1999:225)

This was felt to be very important in the study as the paintings were not only intended to be a vehicle for learning for the researcher, but also a means of facilitating better quality involvement in the study for the participants. Thus the art works needed to be presented within a context which deconstructed the authority of the artist, and replaced it with the perspectives of the participants. Furthermore, the meaning of the texts produced had to be explicitly available to individual interpretation in order for the paintings to be of use as a vehicle for consultation. Thus the Poststructuralist notion of reality being discursively produced was useful here, as it validated the diverse range of responses which the participants gave to the images, without privileging any one. Thus Joy's responses, for instance, while being couched within the vocabulary of academia and artistic criticism did not become seen as more valid than Antonia's, who did not have access to such language.

Thus I explicitly utilised a Postmodern aesthetic, which seeks to avoid the standardisation and elevation of a particular world view, and supports the non-hierarchical ordering of differences (Johnson:1990). This approach allowed me to combine the voices of the participants into images without having to marginalise any, as bringing together conflicting voices within the same text was recognised as a feature of the Postmodern aesthetic where the complexity of social life is acknowledged. Thus in 'Protection' alone, Antonia and Louise's different feelings about parenthood, and Clare and Joy's perspectives on father-daughter relationships could be interpreted and represented within the one image, while numerous other readings of it remained available.



This felt like a more empowering approach, as it enfranchised a diversity of voices to speak in a multiplicity of ways, while the meaning of those voices was left undetermined to shift the focus of meaning away from the researcher and onto the participants and wider audience.

### **The role of the aesthetic.**

If Culture is “The signifying system through which... a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.” (Williams:1981), the Aesthetic is the framework within which cultural artefacts are produced, received and come to have meaning and value. The origin of this framework is ideological in that it validates the meanings of a particular social order when embodied in cultural artefacts, while the influence it has over cultural production and reception is hegemonous, being naturalised to avoid its recognition as constructed, and thus to position it beyond challenge. Terry Eagleton states

"The concept of interpretation, as we know it today, perhaps dates back no further than the nineteenth century... before 'interpretation' in its modern hermeneutical sense was brought to birth, a whole apparatus of power in the field of culture was already firmly in place and had been for about a century. This was not an apparatus which determined the power-effects of particular readings but one which determined the political meaning and function of 'culture' as such. Its name was and is aesthetics." (1992:17)

Thus the 'political meaning and function of culture' is contested, yet largely controlled by the Aesthetic as a function of power which upholds a particular agenda, making it difficult for alternative ideologies expressed through cultural forms to become validated.

The role of the aesthetic in interpretation and evaluation of art works is important in terms of the ways art works created to articulate experiences of social marginalisation are understood and received. As many women artists amongst others have found, working within the Modern aesthetic means using forms which negate one's own identity and experience. Delta Streete states



"It is generally understood that a work of art's authority to represent the world is not held in its uniqueness but is based on the idea of a universal modern aesthetic - modernism in this case. (Until recent times interpretation of this concept was the privilege of white male supremacy.) It was a vision that used certain forms and developments of form to present and represent itself in different areas... The art which these artistic values or 'principles' promotes, is based on its content. This is due to historical evolutions in ideas about taste and forms. As this 'universal' concept of art developed the artistic values frequently presented, were a male vision which dominated the power systems that make valid certain artistic representation. The effect is a simultaneous negation of others." (1990:107)

The impact of the aesthetic therefore extends from the process of creation, at which stage culturally encoded signifying practices are negotiated, to the process of reception, whereby art works are evaluated within an aesthetic which favours the expression of a particular world view. Postmodern cultural creation and reception has attempted to establish an alternative aesthetic by challenging the validity of Modernism as a metanarrative on cultural creation and reception. The privileging of the artist as the site of meaning of a text has been deconstructed, as has the assumption of a text's meaning being hermetically sealed. Alternative modes of creation and representation have become valued in a text, such as its ability to express the discontinuous nature of reality, and the multiple complexity of social life. This has made the articulation of one's reality possible for some marginalized people, who like Delta Streete were erased by the aesthetics of Modernism, by enfranchising other ways of knowing and representing the world. Thus forms were available to me by which I could simultaneously represent the voices of the participants without centralising or marginalizing any one voice, while this would have been impossible under a Modern aesthetic, which demanded a continuous, coherent narrative.

Within this stage of my study I worked consciously to disrupt dominant signifying practices which formed the core of the Modernist aesthetic, and this involved going beyond attempts to re-value experiences polarised around binary opposites, and instead to question how that experience came to mean what it did. The experiences in question were those expressed by the participants at interview, while the ambiguity came from the oftentimes ambivalence they would feel towards them. Therefore, in paintings such as 'Contradiction', 'Protection' and 'Key to Love', the intention was to invoke anxiety



around stereotypical gendered relationships by interfering in the way these would usually connote, and then to suggest multiple alternative realities through the ambiguities in the images. Thus with 'Key to Love' the mirroring effect suggested two different interpretations of the same reality, and the conflicting impacts of that reality upon each of the characters. Thus I attempted to utilise an alternative aesthetic, by disrupting dominant signifying codes and substituting alternative realities in the spaces created by the rupture. Therefore, as the aesthetic 'determines the political meaning and function of culture' (Eagleton:1992), an *oppositional* aesthetic, i.e. that of Postmodernism, was needed to work towards presenting an alternative framework by which 'culture' could come to mean and function differently, and this was part of the project when doing the paintings. However, while I was satisfied with the ways I had been able to utilise Postmodern forms of creation in the representation of my interpretation of the participants' data in the paintings, I was acutely aware of the Postmodern emphasis on the role of the audience at the stage of reception in creating and defining the meaning of the work. Thus, I considered that the ultimate success or failure of the images would be determined at the stage of consultation, when the *process* would firstly indicate how appropriate using images was to engage the participants meaningfully in consultation, while the *participants* would then indicate how successful the images were in capturing and expressing something important about their experiences.

However, rejecting a dominant aesthetic and its attendant vocabularies wasn't as straight forward as this, as alternative aesthetics remain on the borders of mainstream representation and Postmodernism remains defined as the kitsch relation of the still more highly prized Modernism (Story:1993). Similarly other *vocabularies* through which to express alternative realities do not readily exist, and artists are left with the job of expressing Other truths through *existing* vocabularies. As this then brings with it the risks of creating artefacts which threaten to be disempowering as evidenced through the critique of Queer's use of Parody, I considered debates among Feminist artists as to whether the best approach was to find new vocabularies of expression, or to play with existing languages to subvert them (Healy:1996). An example of a Feminist artist using the former approach would be Tee Corrine who attempted to articulate a specifically female visual vocabulary by superimposing labia imagery onto nature photographs, while



an example of the latter would be Della Grace whose book of erotic lesbian photographs entitled *Love Bites* re-appropriated heterosexual pornographic vocabularies to articulate a desiring lesbian subject. Within my study, part of my intention was to disrupt dominant meanings and I did this largely by working within existing cultural vocabularies. However, this was within a process of attempting to find alternative ways of configuring identity, rather than creating a parody to highlight internal contradictions of existing ones. I chose this approach as the literature suggested that attempts to invent a new vocabulary to express alternative realities was ineffective, due to the inevitable implication of the dominant referent by which Other was defined and had meaning (Wilton:1995; Hinds:1992).

Thus in terms of 'Stability', the nude is represented figuratively and bears the culturally defined marks of sex and gender which define her as woman/ female. However, her legs are open and feet are planted firmly on the floor in a pose of confidence and assertion, while her arms are wide open and her gaze is uncompromising, and it is these factors which challenge dominant renderings of female nudes. Traditional portraits construct the nude as either unaware of the voyeuristic gaze of the audience, or submissively colluding with their objectifying gaze, and are often characterised by a downcast gaze, a submissive pose and a sense of vulnerability to the gaze of the audience (Berger:1972; Mulvey:1975). Thus 'Stability' exists within the traditional genre of portrait painting, but intervenes in the ways the subject of the painting and the audience are traditionally gendered and the power relations established between them. However, the real test of its success in making this intervention, will be when the participants, and later a wider audience respond to the paintings, as there remains the threat of the oppositional image being re-appropriated back into mainstream signifying practices, through the discreditation of the central character and the imposition of oppressive meanings. The common occurrence of this as a tactic to deflect the political criticism implicit in marginal cultures' existence is illustrated by the current mainstream 'chic' of a particular representation of lesbianism (Wilton:1995). This co-option of a social identity which implicitly critiques gender roles and interpersonal power relations, renders its political potential invisible by presenting it as a whim of fashion, a frivolity.



The co-option of subversive images works in much the same way, as the meaning of an image is re-constituted as unthreatening to the mainstream. This type of co-option in the Arts, as a means of neutralising the threat of criticism is illustrated by Moe Meyer, making reference to Andrew Ross, who discusses this issue in relation to Camp performance. He states

“When Camp is defined as a specifically queer discourse, it follows that what Ross calls the redefinition of meanings is the appropriation, through the application of unequal power, of queer discourse by the dominant order. This appropriation attempts to defuse the Camp critique by redefining the actions of the queer within the nonthreatening context of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality which, because the representational apparatus cannot render a queer subject, constitutes, simply, its erasure.” (1994:14)

Thus a discourse which originally intended to critique dominant constructions of gender and sexuality, once recuperated by the mainstream, erases the very subject who originally articulated it. Thus the fear of co-option in terms of my study was that the images, once neutralised by the mainstream would be more oppressive to the participants I sought to represent than those which work within dominant conventions and pose no threat. Actively avoiding this type of recuperation is difficult, and is related to the ways in which meanings are assigned to a text, and the extent to which the subject positions offered to the audience can be limited and controlled. Jim Mienczakowski reports confronting a similar dilemma while working with research participants in the medium of ethno-drama. He discusses the danger of (re)creating stereotypes from the participants’ testimonies, and suggests that this is compounded when at times these *do* resonate with experiences. However he argues, he dealt with the tension by focusing on the emancipatory goals of the project and re-valuing the participants’ *other* identities, which then made what at first appeared stereotypical, more complex. He states,

“If data demonstrates stereotypical and popularised understandings of health consumption, then to reify such understandings in text and performance would be to disadvantage and constrain further our informants’ *explanations of their other selves*.” (2000:131)



This was a key question for me to take into the next consultation stage of the study. However, this consideration of actively shaping possible reading positions offered by the text lead me into conflict with my desire to shift authority away from the researcher and onto the participants, as attempting to control the reception of the texts contradicted this aim, and created a significant tension for me which I was unable to fully resolve at the stage of creation of the paintings.

### **Art and ideology.**

In terms of cultural politics, Jordan and Weedon define the key questions as:

“Whose culture shall be the official one and whose subordinated? What cultures shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden? Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten? What images of social life shall be projected and which shall be marginalized? What voices shall be heard and which be silenced? Who is representing whom and on what basis?” (1995:4)

Their last question was of particular interest for me as participants acknowledged the relative rarity of texts which adequately expressed something of their reality, whether this be bisexuality, childhood abuse, or stereotyping. The representations available were often seen as inadequate, inaccurate, simplistic or patronising, and this is echoed by theorists who examine the role of culture in perpetuating oppressive myths about marginal groups such as women in general, disabled people, non-white and non-Christian peoples, those labelled as having mental health problems and more recently those living with the still stigmatising condition of HIV/ AIDS (Shakespeare: 1996; Wilton:1995; Parmar:1990). The role of dominant culture in the creation and dissemination of these messages is tied in with the relationship between the Arts and ideology, and the role of the aesthetic as a vehicle of ideology. Thus part of the aim of working with visual images was to create more representative illustrations of the experiences the participants were describing, and this involved articulating alternative ideologies within the images.

Janet Woolf defines ideology as “a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group” (1981:54), and she argues that the economically and politically dominant



sections of society generally dominate ideology, as they control the most centralised means of producing and disseminating *information*. The production and dissemination of information thus falls within the category of ‘signifying systems’ through which Culture is constructed, challenged and maintained. Thus as this country remains predominantly socially structured by race, culture, language, ethnicity, class, economic status, gender, sexuality and physical and intellectual ability, the dominant ideology will reflect this and those who are positioned unfavourably in relation to these axes will potentially be marginalized and misrepresented within information producing systems. When these Others then begin to challenge the legitimacy of the centralising power which marginalizes them, by trying to intervene in the production of information, as women, lesbians and gay men and Black people did in their respective civil rights movements, the response will often be to discredit the challenge to neutralise their threat. In order to discredit challengers, the images and ideas produced *by* them will be presented as suspect, while messages produced *about* them through centralised information systems can become increasingly unfavourable. As these are absorbed into society and its institutions, the constructed messages become internalised as ‘common knowledge’ creating institutionalised oppression. However, those marginalized within decision making processes and discredited through the creation of oppressive definitions of themselves may have a different belief system and this will be manifested in alternative ideologies. These ideologies may challenge dominant ideology, such as a lesbian separatist ideology which rejects mainstream society as patriarchal and oppressive, or may co-exist with dominant ideology, such as a gay and lesbian civil rights ideology, which asserts the right to equal participation in the existing society. Thus the cultural artefacts produced by those with alternative ideologies will challenge those embodying dominant ideology and an arena for contestation emerges whereby groups struggle to get their definitions legitimated.

A key starting point in developing the paintings out of the participants’ data was an interrogation of the **meanings** currently dominant in the participants’ lives. Griselda Pollock (1987) examined the impact which images of women had upon attitudes towards their status in society, and concluded that ‘woman’ acted as a sign within an ideological discourse, whereby a limited number of meanings such as ‘body’, ‘commodity’, and



'passive site of reception' were possible signifieds. She went on to argue that this reduction of possible meanings for some signs such as 'woman', occurs because of the way signs are read within the dominant ideology. However, I was aware that this contradicted Poststructural theory which posited that meaning is produced discursively, and thus the foreclosure of a sign such as 'woman' should not be possible. The writing of Stuart Hall offers an explanation of this as he argues that within the encoding and decoding process involved in communication, exist codes which have widely shared and understood meanings. He states

"Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language, community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be 'naturally' given... This has the (ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present."(1981:132)

Thus, in our culture, 'woman as sex object' does not appear as an ideological, constructed meaning, but one which pre-exists construction and which therefore cannot be challenged. Thus even as reality is discursively produced, the impact of naturalised ideology within certain signs may predispose certain meanings to be dominant although not inevitable. Thus what the participants' experiences *meant* both in dominant and oppositional ideology was important in terms of knowing how it would often be interpreted, and in considering how to represent it in images in order for oppressive meanings to be challenged, and more accurate and expansive meanings to be articulated.

Kate Linker (1984) argues that reality can only be known through the forms which articulate it, and thus exposure to oppressive messages about one's inability to walk, for example, will result in the understanding of that reality as imperfect and undesirable. This is demonstrated by Merry Cross who says

"And it isn't easy to draw the line between oppression and abuse. Isn't it abusive to use disabled people in fiction as metaphors for evil (the wicked witches and evil pirates, for example)? And isn't it abusive to describe someone's blind eye as their *bad* eye? No wonder so many of us, abused or not, half kill ourselves trying to prove how *good* we are!"(1995:164)



The ideological limitation of meanings within signs was then something which I struggled to negotiate in the paintings and which created a lot of tension. Firstly to signify 'woman' in ways which challenged stereotypical readings, and then to inscribe this woman with the realities of multiple and contradictory facets was extremely challenging. In terms of 'Stability' the pose and the gaze of the central figure seemed to offer the potential to radically challenge oppressive definitions of 'woman as sex object', and yet to *simultaneously* threaten to reinforce them. This impasse resonated with Joshua Gamson's (1998) analysis of the dilemma of the future of social group political organising, as he recognised that the identities this organising was based on were simultaneously emancipatory *and* oppressive. Felicity Edholm (1992) argues that the pervasiveness of a standard formula for creating images of women in our culture makes it difficult to re-value ourselves by other standards. She says

"Even when we as individuals reject the subject positions offered in dominant images, or see them as irrelevant, it is still difficult, in the absence of many powerfully visualised alternatives, to escape their influence and impact. The process of looking at our own reflections in the mirror is some indication of this; it is at some level uncomfortable. Getting a sense of self-worth and autonomy against these dominant images and the values they represent can be difficult. So, the image in the mirror is shadowed by these other images – 'ideals' of Woman, of desirability – and by the gaze of others." (1992:156)

When constructing the paintings, I struggled with notions of beauty, body and appearance, aware that women achieve much of their social status through levels of attractiveness (Schur:1984). The experiencing of these norms was something I wished to explore, but which again threatened to simultaneously reinforce that which it sought to challenge. In 'Protection' I attempted to prevent the presence of a breast inviting an objectifying gaze, by omitting hair and other 'feminine' features from the figure, thus intervening in dominant signifying practices. However, in doing the paintings I came to realise with 'Denial' that I was not necessarily reliant upon socially defined categories to express the realities of the participants which in reality broke out of these. Instead I found that dominant signifiers could be used to illustrate the falsity of boundaries and the actual infinite possibilities of reality as encompassed within the participants' data. Thus 'Denial' fails to connote man, woman, male, female, straight, lesbian or otherwise despite



contextual cues, thus the determinacy of these categories is rendered suspect. However, I believe this was more successful with some images than with others, as ‘Symbols’ always seemed to remain dependent upon the gender categories it sought to disrupt, and in an image like this, I got locked into the same impasse which Queer theorists argue Lesbian Feminists have, which is simultaneously depending upon the categories which oppress one. This image remained however, as I was interested in what the participants would make of it in their role as audience, and whether their responses would offer any ways out of the deadlock.

The importance of the participants actively creating self defined meanings, by challenging and reconfiguring my interpretations was central to the intentions of this stage of consultation, and one of the purposes of utilising art making within methodology was to facilitate this. This theme is explored by Audre Lorde in her biomythography ‘*Zami: A new spelling of my name*’, and the importance of adequate and accurate representation of the self is clear. In her analysis, Erin G. Carlston states

“The importance of the written word in creating identity is reiterated elsewhere in the novel. In the title, for example: “Zami” is “[a] Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.” A new spelling of Lorde’s name that once more links her ethnic and sexual identities and writing. Or again, when Audre resolves at the age of five to “make up a story of my own”; or finds, years later, that the lesbian pulp novels don’t discuss love triangles like the one she is involved in and knows that “that meant we had to write it ourselves...”(48, 213). These words are, of course, embedded in the text that they prophesy, a novel that writes (about) identity.” (1993:228)

However, while Lorde had the strength to decide that her unarticulated experiences were worthy of representation, and the skill to write them, for many it can be more difficult to identify that the absences lie outside oneself, and this was testified to by Joy, Antonia and Elise in their first interviews as they all described the intense effort needed to re-evaluate childhood experiences of abuse. Thus alternative, more empowering images need to be encountered or created if marginalized people are to identify, label and resist the oppressive definitions externally imposed on them. The paintings were thus also intended to validate the opinions expressed in the participants’ data, to visualise them and make them public, while within this process was included my own level of interpretation



to translate spoken words into collective images. The paintings were then shared with participants, who were invited to challenge and reconfigure them to make them more representative. Thus this was designed to *expand* the meanings made of the data, rather than reduce them, and so to open up more possibilities rather than reduce the possible signifieds as occurs through oppressive ideology.

However, the success of the strategy again would only become apparent at the stage of consultation as the participants defined the meanings of the texts. In terms of reception of the art works, I felt it necessary to consider whether engaging in the Arts did more than just raise self esteem and build group identity, and whether the Arts could be an effective vehicle for direct political resistance? In terms of a Feminist project of emancipation, Griselda Pollock states

"Art works are texts and can be understood as a site of a particular organisation of socially instituted signs which produce meaning in a field composed of other signs i.e. other texts and general cultural systems of representation... Therefore, what makes an art work feminist, for instance, is the way in which it intervenes in what can be called the social relations of artistic production and reception, the social relations of signification." (1987:93) (emphasis mine)

This was important in this study in terms of the aims of using art work as a resisting text within a discourse of unequal social relations, and to evaluate its effectiveness as a strategy of intervention. Thus the type of intervention a text makes into the social relations of signification will be a strong indicator in terms of its efficiency. Thus a text may be evaluated as to whether it goes beyond the realm of the personal, and enters the larger arena of interrupting the dominant system of cultural signification, and impacting upon the meaning of subjectivity. To use the example of 'Stability' again, engaging with the uncompromising gaze of the central character I believed, may lead some participants to a positive re-valuation of their own self concept, which would make it a successful image on one level. However, if on a broader social level the image got recuperated back into the mainstream as a titillating, objectifying image of female sexuality, then it would have failed in another sense. I was aware that these two outcomes could occur simultaneously, and thus the potential for the images to meaningfully intervene at a



higher level, in dominant modes of signification, became problematised for me. This was related to the various impacts the paintings might have at both a micro and a macro level, and with those who identified with the image and those who didn't. The impact on those who didn't identify with the images I felt was then crucial to their success, as the extent to which they demanded a radical reading and resisted recuperation may determine at what level signification can be interfered with.

To briefly summarise then, part of my approach to engaging with the data through art making was to begin to understand the role of culture in society, ways of intervening in the processes of signification, and the ways in which artefacts embody ideology. Understanding the 'aesthetic' as part of ideology was a significant aspect of this. This understanding lead me to consider the meanings of the signs I was using, and the range of possible referents they would signify, and thus to question how the audience response might be shaped by specific strategies I chose to employ. I concluded that working within existing cultural vocabularies to express an alternative social reality was inevitable, but not a process which would yield results in a straightforward or consistent way. Thus I was left picking my way carefully through the minefield of representation.

### Working as an Artist.

This section will explore the ways in which making images of oneself is central to the presentation of more accurate and expansive narratives on one's own life and experiences, and will examine the ways in which groups and individuals are marginalized in the process of representation. I will then go on to consider the ways in which I approached the project of exploring data through visual images and the implications of the choices I made.

### Self creation and representation.

A fundamental aspect of creating visual images within the study, was to enable the participants to see representative images of their own experiences, to begin to articulate



that which remained largely unarticulated within mainstream culture, and to challenge the stereotypes which the participants identified as limiting the possibilities of their lives. It was also important that the participants got to evaluate these images, and were able to challenge them and suggest alternative means of representation, to initiate a process whereby they began to take increasing ownership of the meanings made within the study. A central project of sub-cultures too, is to produce images of its members which challenge dominant ideology and promote more realistic and empowering representations. Elspeth Morrison and Vic Finkelstein (1994) argue that when a group in society is dominant, their culture is asserted while others are suppressed, and that this is presented as the fault of the marginal, whose cultural output is seen to fall, while their cultures gradually disappear. Within the context of disability, they argue that the presence or absence of marginal cultures indicates the extent to which the group members are managing their own affairs, while the existence of shared cultural activity from a common agenda can generate the formation of a new sense of self. They state

“A developing disability culture can not only increase insight into the progress of disabled people becoming active in the area of civil rights, but can provide important opportunities for individuals to gain confidence by forming a new and independent social identity. From this point of view the formation of a distinctive and vibrant disability culture is a vital component in the construction of an accessible route to empowerment.” (1994:126)

The possibility of forming a new, empowering, independent **social identity**, through participation in the creation and reception of one's own culture is a key element in the role of art making for many marginalized people, and this resonated with some of the thinking in this study. This relates again to Joshua Gamson's (1998) arguments about the future of social identities as the basis for political organising, and my belief in the Postmodern challenge to deconstruct reductive identities, as the way forward. As the notion of a viable social identity which is not reductionist is not yet theorised, the challenge was to create a new social identity which adequately conceptualised diversity within its parameters. A central feature of the study was the opportunity for participants to reflect on and manage their own self construction and maintenance, within the context of the production of more representative and empowering images and possible identities.



While I was the artist, in terms of creating the images, the participants were encouraged through consultation to challenge and change them, to manipulate them into more accurate and representative forms. Thus at this stage they became co-producers and took on ownership and control of the images.

This mode of self creation is important when the inadequacy of available images is made explicit. Both Alkarim Jivani (1997) and Bernice Mennis (1982) recall the scarcity of images on television of people of their own race when they were growing up, while Jivani contrasts this with the Camp representations of his homosexuality. One assumes that the possibility of seeing a gay black man on t.v. would have been beyond comprehension at the time, and therefore, while Jivani's racial identity was rarely addressed on television, his sexual identity was, but in stereotyped and limiting ways, which he recalls being worse. Mennis explains how sensitive her family were to the types of portrayals they saw of themselves as Jews, and argues that the types of images one saw of oneself on television impacted upon the ways in which other people in society treated those who shared that identity. Therefore, the embodiment of dominant ideology in popular culture creates a system within which public feeling can be quickly influenced and mobilised. Even within marginal communities themselves, the limitations on acceptable ways to express oneself have been present, through the restricted images which are available. JoAnn Loulan says

“... in regard to our lesbian sexualities we still have our gender identification tied to the archetypes of the majority culture. We have a lesbian cultural stereotype that butches are dominant, assertive, aggressive and self-reliant. We carry in our subconscious the cultural message that mothers are passive. This is a basis not only for society's misogyny but also for our own internalised misogyny... We are struggling for self-definition in a culture that has kept our consciousness in a tight-fitting box... on my own scale I am a No. 1 femme and proud of it. I identify as a femme bull dyke – that is, a strong, political, powerful, loud, proud dyke in a dress. Yet my gender identity as a revolutionary lesbian makes me suspect in my own community.”  
(1995:249/250)

The importance of finding an adequate vocabulary to break out of the pervasive stereotypes of dominant ideology has become central to the methodology within this study, whereby paintings have been used to construct and express the realities of the



participants' lives, in ways which attempt to challenge stereotypical interpretations of them.

The debate surrounding available means of representation and ways of knowing is also important in terms of working anti-oppressively. Such issues are contested in sections of the disabled community in terms of the construction of the act of knowing around a single means of sensing and experiencing. Furthermore, the privileging of sight as a metaphor for knowledge has perpetuated a discourse of objectification based on a phallic symbolic order whereby women are objectified on the basis of their visual 'absence'. Kate Linker states

"Throughout representation there are abundant – even preponderant – forms in which the apparatus works to constitute the subject as male, denying subjectivity to woman. Woman, within this structure, is unauthorised, illegitimate: she does not represent but is, rather, represented. Placed in a passive rather than active role, as object rather than subject, she is the constant point of masculine appropriation in a society in which representation is empowered to construct identity." (1984:393)

Shelley Tremain recognises the privileging of sight as a metaphor for knowledge and criticises women for buying into it without critically analysing the implications of this. She argues that objectifying discourses do not monolithically affect women, as a homogenous social group, but extend more pervasively to others who experience a diversity of social marginalisations. While hi-jacking the symbolic order by 'becoming visible' may appear as an empowering project for non-disabled lesbian women, the framework within which resistance and emancipation is constructed might be experienced as restrictive by those who do not experience the world in such ways, while it simultaneously ties theorists to systems of thought which encode their objectification. Tremain states

"To put it bluntly, some of the most frequently used, and widely understood, linguistic practices of dyke cultures... are implicitly ableist, and disableist ones.

Take, for instance, the ways in which the term 'visible' and 'invisible' are currently used as metaphors in dyke, and queer, cultures. Within lesbian, gay and queer cultures, to say that one is "visible" (that is, *seen*), is to imply that



one is accounted for, recognised, acknowledged, and has community, as well as personal pride; meanwhile, to say that one is "invisible" (that is, *not seen*), is to imply that one is not accounted for, not recognised/ misrecognised, not acknowledged/ ignored, and often also to imply that one is ashamed, embarrassed, self-loathing, in denial. Notice how these metaphors privilege *seeing* as that activity which enables one to produce the most reliable knowledge, where if one can *see* a given thing, then one can know the thing as it *really* is. In other words, one who can *see*, can produce knowledge; in contrast, one who *cannot see*, cannot produce knowledge..." (1996:18)

Thus to work anti-oppressively must involve a wider conception of knowing, being known and of expressing that knowledge, and as a researcher jointly constructing new knowledge with the participants, everyone's experience of knowing must be acknowledged. This consideration of other people's reasons for working to establish new ways of knowing challenged my own assumptions and unconscious privileges, and made me reconsider my own writing and painting practices. In many ways, working in the Arts brought the challenge of articulating as a 'knowing subject' into sharper relief for me, as I struggled to validate other means of knowing the world both from a mainstream academic perspective of using images in research, and from an artistic perspective in terms of using existing vocabularies in new ways.

### **Representing identity.**

In this final section I would like to examine the importance of representing identity in terms of multifaceted diversity, and relate this to the way the art work in the study aimed to represent the complexity of the participants' lives. Midway through the study I moved away from a Feminist paradigm and toward an anti-oppressive one, as this recognised the ways in which individuals were multifariously positioned in relation to axes of social stratification, and resisted privileging one identity as the main source of an individual's oppression. Instead, reality was viewed as contingent and the shifting nature of identity and oppression was recognised. Thus from this new paradigm it was possible to look at the participants' lives from a range of perspectives and to consider a multitude of possibilities, rather than always starting from the point of gender oppression. Thus as the study moved into its second stage and I began analysing data through making visual



images, the importance of working in an anti-oppressive way was central as I strove to represent the diverse reality of the women's lives, resisting falling into the use of monolithic, restrictive definitions of identity.

However, on reflection I believe I fell into the trap I thought I had avoided, as one of the first challenges I perceived was to represent women in ways which disrupted the dominant signifying systems which positioned Woman as a sexualised visual object. This therefore privileged gender as the main frame by which to consider the participants' data, and thus did marginalize other aspects of the participants' reality. However, I believe I did this with the best of intentions, as I was extremely conscious of the ways in which women are objectified in visual images and was passionate about not wanting to replicate these representational mechanisms in my own work. Laura Mulvey states

"Woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command, by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."  
(1975:413)

This, she and Kaplan (1983) argued, occurs in cinematic form through the devices of

- scopophilia (the pleasure of watching others having sex),
- voyeurism (watching someone secretly from a hidden vantage point),
- fetishism (focusing sexual attention on a particular feature),
- objectification (viewing a person as an object for actions to be done to),
- eroticisation (placing a sexual interpretation on a situation),
- glorification (attributing unrealistic qualities)
- and disparagement (withdrawing praise and exacting criticism for not living up to the unrealistic expectations),

which all serve to sustain the distance between the image and the spectator which gives the gaze of the assumed male viewer its power. While these are cinematic devices, others exist within the visual arts, which similarly construct the viewer as male, and position the depicted woman as the passive recipient of his gaze (Berger:1972).

These theories coincide with Foucault's notion of the change in the nature of power from sovereign power to modern regulatory power, which signified more subtle and



sinister forms of repression, an example of which would be the policing of women's sexuality through representational devices (Deveaux:1994). Objectification within cultural texts is not limited to women, as Shakespeare (1993) argues that in representation, disabled people are presented in much the same way within similar power relations of viewing, whilst Grewal et al (1988) also report images of themselves as immigrants being limiting and unrepresentative. Thus all marginal people, in terms of their empowerment, share the project of negotiating with modes of representation in order to produce more fulfilling images. Grewal et al state

"This is what we are doing - preserving, extending and redefining ourselves in order to create a situation in which 'blackness' as commonly understood, has no social meaning. In effect we are consciously choosing to continue our migration into a better more comfortable place where we are made in our own, ever changing image." (1988:5)

Thus the 'male gaze' as theorised by Mulvey and Kaplan can be recognised as part of a larger 'normalising gaze' suggested by Foucault, who argued that the regulatory imperative of this gaze became internalised in order for people to become self-regulating (Deveaux:1994).

Lois Keith graphically describes through poetry how she works as a disabled woman towards advancing a vocabulary by which her own experiences can be adequately expressed, thus breaking out of the regulatory framework which constructs her as Other in terms of being and knowing. She writes

"Tomorrow I am going to rewrite the English Language.  
I will discard all those striving ambulist metaphors  
of power and success  
And construct new ways to describe my strength.  
My new, different strength.

Then I won't have to feel dependent  
Because I can't stand on my own two feet.  
And I'll refuse to feel a failure  
When I don't stay one step ahead.  
I won't feel inadequate if I can't  
Stand up for myself  
Or illogical when I don't



Take it one step at a time." (1995:57)

This is another attempt to work outside dominant signifying practices in order to represent oneself in empowering ways, and which requires negotiation of the forms and media of cultural production. I was similarly anxious to disrupt these mechanisms to produce more empowering images and also to create more empowering viewing positions for the participants to take on when they looked at them. Part of Deveau's critique of Foucault is that the challenge to put the radical politics into practice, using signs in new and critical ways, lacks concrete examples of how this might be achieved, and thus she doubts its potential (1994). However, theorists such as Keith (1995) and Tremain (1996) appear to be making progress in this project of finding new frameworks of articulation.

Alongside this challenge of subverting dominant gendered signifying practices, I was conscious of wanting to also find ways of representing the complexity of the participants' lives, so as to avoid defining them in limiting and inaccurate ways. It was therefore at this point, when I felt I had somewhat resolved the dilemmas around representing women within potentially objectifying forms and media, that I felt able to consider the multiplicity of experience which the participants had expressed, and begin to work to represent it. This linked directly into working within the anti-oppressive paradigm and Postmodern aesthetic, which recognises the potential of texts to be polyphonic, and to therefore represent multiple and potentially competing perspectives within the same voice. In terms of the paintings, this involved looking for the relationships between the different facets of a person's life, and exploring those relationships and the ways they were experienced. This was complex as the participants often expressed ambiguity in terms of their feelings and experiences, and I was keen to harness the quality of this indeterminacy in the images. For instance, in 'Key to Love' there are multiple tensions being explored in relation to attachment and separation, responsibility, parenting, ageing, power and love and none of these are easily simplified in a straightforward way. Similarly in 'Protection' the feelings around parenthood, childhood, physicality, pregnancy and relationships are intricate and defy simplistic presentation. I then attempted to contextualise these relationships within the wider unequal society, to comment upon the diverse and changing reality of the material



conditions of the participants' lives. This led to the creation of texts which were internally discontinuous, which testified to the complex interweaving of themes which was present in the participants' transcripts. It also illuminated the differences between the participants and prevented those differences being erased. Christine Battersby states,

"Since a woman in our culture has to construct herself out of fragments, the work that she produces is likely to seem incoherent unless we fit it together into an overarching unity." (1989:151)

However, incoherence is a relative term, and what may seem incoherent as a narrative to one, might fit as a contingent truth for another, thus I am wary of the negative connotation which accompanies the description of a text as 'incoherent'. Battersby is however, a Modernist theorist whereas a Postmodern approach might allow for this fragmentation to exist without recourse to an overarching structure, as 'fragmentation' might be the key to the story being told. The passing of time between the points of direct contact with the participants, and the re-negotiation of meanings within ever shifting social relations was a dynamic feature which I attempted to represent, and which didn't lend itself to 'coherence' in a simple way.

The result was a set of 'texts' which required the viewer to actively construct meaning during the process of engaging with them and thus to be an involved presence in the process. This felt important in terms of drawing and presenting conclusions which were empowering, in the sense of containing space for multiple interpretations. This was in an explicit attempt to avoid privileging the artist's (researcher's) perspective, and to offer the participants the opportunity to take on the role of the researcher when engaging with the paintings. Thus at the stage of consultation the participants would be asked for their responses to the paintings, which would then define them in terms of the meanings to be drawn from the research. In this way, many voices on the paintings could be presented, in order to give expression to the dynamic nature of the process of shifting identities and constructions of self. The degree to which this was achieved will be examined in Part Three through the discussion of the participants' responses to the paintings.



## Conclusion.

To summarise then, within the context of ideology and opposition, the actual forms used to represent reality take on huge significance in terms of their potential to be empowering or objectifying. Thus the careful negotiation of representational apparatuses was necessary to produce a set of images which I felt conveyed the issues and questions raised by the participants in ways which were compatible with the ethical underpinning of the study. At the same time, the images themselves engaged in a wider cultural discourse of meaning, in which they contributed to a broader debate about representation, subjectivity and power. While the process of creation of the paintings engaged me in numerous debates and dilemmas, the key to using the approach as part of methodology lay in the reception of the images by the participants, and the extent to which they were enabled to comment critically on them, to challenge my conclusions, and to construct their own alternatives. Therefore the issues I took forward out of these debates were

- the impact and effectiveness of the paintings as consultation documents
- the impact of the paintings as cultural artefacts attempting to intervene in the process of signification of the dominant social order
- the effectiveness of images to explore alternative constructions of identities and refuse objectifying articulations of ways of being.

Thus I was keen to find out what the quality of the participation would be at this stage of consultation, which lead me to consider what good quality participation would be, and how it would be recognised and evaluated.

I began by thinking that the type of participation I hoped for, and thus would describe as being quality, was where the participants would discuss their perceptions of the conclusions I had drawn in the paintings, being very honest about where their perspectives confirmed or diverged from my ideas. Participants would then describe the ways in which they would alter and adapt my conclusions to be more representative, which would lead to debate between us, within which we would work towards a shared understanding of the issues, the agreements and the differences. Consensus would not



necessarily be the desired outcome, but the production of a further set of data by which the story of the research was made more complex. I hoped that this then would centralise the perspectives of the participants, as their interpretations of the paintings would define the study, and drive it onwards in terms of opening up new avenues of enquiry. Thus I took the paintings to the participants, hoping for them to be debated and challenged in ways which the conceptual map failed to stimulate.

17/5/00

I read and re-read the chapter we've just written. I think about the paintings and the things I feel when I look at them. I still like 'Denial' but today I got loads out of looking at 'Protection'. It's like I saw things I hadn't noticed before. I could remember being the floating body once, and I knew what it was like to be that pregnant woman, but today I was right inside the womb curled up like a foetus again feeling okay about where I was and wondering whether I want to come out again. It's a big question.

We've reached the end of part two then... and I'm excited about where we are going next with this. The possibilities do seem endless and I like that. I've been thinking of my birthday coming up and what to do to celebrate it. The best birthday I've had was the surprise fancy dress party they threw for me at the DV8 club, where you dragged me into the back room and showed me the costume you'd made for me. You'd done me Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, even down to borrowing Buster to be Toto, and after you had done my hair, make-up and squeezed me into the ruby slippers I was more dragged up than most of the queens there. That was a



good night. This year I want to do something outrageous like that again, to feel younger and more reckless than I have for a while. Perhaps Dorothy can come out of the closet again for another night!



## Part Three: Learning New Stuff





19/5/00

Amber told me today that she's pregnant. I was, like, 'wow!' She told me while we were having a coffee break, and she burst into tears. I started crying too. Amber is usually so strong and resilient but she's got so much pain as well, and I've never really seen that before. I felt bad crying, cos I knew I wasn't crying for Amber but for me... for the loss of my parents, for the childhood I didn't really have, for the children I'll never bear and for the person I'm just desperate to become. We sat and hugged and cried for ages. When we stopped crying, Amber told me she's really pleased she's having a baby, but is really scared of getting fat and not being able to burn it off afterwards, of Social Services coming in and questioning her parenting just because she is disabled, and of the adaptations she is going to have to make in her life and identity and relationships and everything. She started crying again at this point. Then she told me to start thinking about my job, and whether I wanted to keep it if it extended to helping with the baby too. I'm thinking hard.

What we did do today though was finish the chapter about the women's responses to using the paintings as a way of reporting back Amber's conclusions. I was hooked by some of the things they said about the paintings and how they interpreted them. It was so interesting to contrast this with my understanding of them, and I realised that I never once doubted my own feelings about them, but used the other people's responses to extend and deepen my own. I thought this was real progress for me and I told Amber, and I even went so far as to share with her that I think I used to be the boyish figure in 'Denial'. We had a really



interesting conversation about that image and how different people interpret the pink figure depending on their own ways of understanding sex and gender.

This was a good day. Amber and I reached a new level in our relationship. I have kept a copy of the latest chapter to read again over the next few weeks. Andy, things are beginning to fall into place for me here.



## Chapter 8.

### A reflection on the use of my own art work as a tool for reporting back to participants.

#### Introduction.

The second stage of data analysis where I was considering the feedback from the participants on the ‘map’ I had drawn up from the first round of interviews with them, lead me into working in visual images rather than in words. This resulted in the production of seven paintings which represented the findings from the process of data analysis. At the end of this process I then wanted to use the images I had created as a tool to report back my conclusions to the participants, as a means of investigating whether this would prove a more accessible medium for the participants to engage with, in terms of recognising the issues, seeing and thinking about familiar ideas in new ways, and challenging perceived inaccuracies and omissions. At this stage in the study, only two participants remained in contact with me (Antonia and Joy). Since the previous interview, one person had moved and had not contacted me with a forwarding address, while two had expressed a wish to not participate any further. Of these two, one felt she had too much else on and could not afford the time, while the other was finding it difficult to combine participating in the study via e-mail and telephone while in her final year at university. I therefore carried out two interviews where the participants talked about their responses to the paintings, and it was while I was reflecting on the outcomes of the interviews that I had a fundamental shift in the way I thought about ‘participation’ in the study. I began to think more deeply about the purposes of reporting back conclusions to participants and consulting them about their perceptions, and the implications of engaging the participants in this way. I also considered the ways in which the participants had responded to the paintings and what this said about the usefulness of this method in terms of consultation. I then considered the data which had emerged, and the ways in which this contributed in moving the study on. It is these reflections which I will share here.



The writing will be organised in the following way:

- **Introduction to the approach:** will briefly explain the rationale behind the approach and the method used.
- **Telling your story:** will consider the ways in which the participants made individual responses to the images, and how these in conjunction with data from previous transcripts created a text with more depth and texture.
- **The quality of the feedback:** will explore the ways in which this process of consultation added to the developing picture of the study as a whole.
- **Responding as an artist:** will consider the ways in which the paintings facilitated the participants to respond in a multimedia way.
- **Challenging:** will explore the ways in which the participants re-constructed the images to more closely represent their realities.
- **Questions for further consideration:** will outline the issues which were raised by the process and which I decided to explore further, which are ownership, parameters, where the meaning of a text lies, and fixed and unfixed meanings.

### **Introduction to the approach.**

The purpose of using art making as a means of data analysis was to look at the participants' material in a new way and to reach fresh understandings through consideration and development of ideas through visual forms. The purpose of using paintings as a medium for reporting back to participants was to explore whether this was a more effective means of engaging participants in more meaningful consultation about the conclusions being drawn about their material. I considered visual images to be potentially more effective than a written report or another conceptual map because of the ways in which we respond to images. Judy Weisner (1993) in discussing the therapeutic potential of Phototherapy techniques elaborates on the significance of the ways in which we perceive images and respond to them. She argues that while in a visual image we will each see the same components which make it up, we will each invest them with different meanings and value, and thus attend to some aspects of the image more than others. These differences, she argues, can offer valuable insights into an individuals' internal life



in terms of what is most important for them and the experiences they bring with them to the image. Weisner argues that what a person understands an image to be about *emotionally*, as well as visually can unlock knowledge and insight about a person's feeling and understanding. It was this potential which I felt the conceptual map I created failed to harness, and thus I decided to experiment with images as a means of communicating and consulting. Thus at the interview, the participants were asked to tell me about their responses to the paintings. They could talk about them in any order, and respond in any way, about any aspect of the image, and open ended discussion developed from there.

However, in creating visual images I entered into a cultural process of signification, whereby signs worked on multiple levels, and as explored in the previous chapter, I had struggled to work within a visual language which could easily be objectifying and oppressive. A crucial part of my own reflection on the process of using paintings in the study then, was the ways in which the participants responded to my strategies for effecting an interference in dominant signifying practices. About 'Stability', Joy said

"the one/ which is similar to [Contradiction] in that it has a rising sun, in gold, at the back, and that is a really powerful and enjoyable image, and there is very good, sort of lovely sort of painterly things been done here with the stripes in the background. Erm, I wouldn't change this painting, I think it's, you know, the composition is good, very interesting to see, there is less obvious symbolism in it, and I think, you know, for the stage at which you painted that, that stays and that's fine, and I like the way the arms are, seem to be embracing, but in another strange kind of way they're cutting off, and it's *almost* has a feeling of crucifixion about it, but not quite, it's more a cutting off, and although these people are looking out and looking away, they're not looking towards and embracing and I find that very interesting."

This suggested that the image worked for Joy as a means of intervening in signifying systems which construct naked women in images in disempowering ways. In response to other paintings, the participants made a range of comments about the gender relations which were apparent, and these created discussion points, rather than the relations being inscribed in the images in unquestionable ways. For instance, about 'Contradiction', Antonia said



“it’s really funny looking against this [green] guy, who is therewith his eyes wide open saying look, you know, this is me, I’m here and I know what it’s all about, and she’s very passive in a way, and that’s why I linked it to the church”

while Joy made the following comments about ‘Denial’,

“I like very much the subtle image in the centre here... a lot of sort of unborn babies in a way in these pictures, you know, unborn selves... and when he’s uppermost [pink figure]... she almost sinks into darkness doesn’t she so it’s... she seems to be almost under water... I wonder whether it’s possible to look at reflection, so a sort of dual gender reflection might be fun in future paintings...”

The responses of the participants seemed to indicate the relevance of the images as material for debate, as where gender came up as an issue this was positively constructive and challenging, and the participants were able to use the images as the basis to articulate other possibilities.

### **Telling your story.**

The approach of using visual art works as a medium of consultation appeared to allow the participants to respond in quite individual ways, working from their own frame of reference, rather than being lead prescriptively by the presentation of my conclusions. Responding to the ideas in the paintings facilitated the participants in telling another layer of their individual stories about their involvement with the research, and their understanding of the issues under discussion. This was an active process of construction of meaning and understanding of the images, within the context of their existing internal stories, which appeared to require a much more proactive style of engagement than the conceptual map had done. The paintings, being deliberately ambiguous, engaged the participants in the process of individual interpretation of the images and this lead to more diverse insights into the participants’ understanding than the map had. These insights began to answer a question asked by oral historians of “how do individuals decide to construct and express their identities” (Lapovsky Kennedy:1998:348) as the participants



constructed and expressed their own identities in response to those they perceived in the images. This was interesting in terms of Foucault's question (1984) of the ways in which identities could be reconfigured, as the use of images within the consultation process created a situation whereby the participants could re-frame the expression of their identities through their critical responses to the paintings.

Thus the two participants took quite different approaches to responding to the paintings and this was useful in terms of analysing how accessible the visual images were in terms of facilitating an individual response. Joy, a Further Education College art tutor and practicing visual artist responded primarily through comments about the form, composition and use of media. My initial feeling was that this was akin to a tutorial, but when I looked more closely at the transcript of the interview, it was clear that there was a pattern to her suggestions for changing, improving and developing the work, which gave certain insights into her feelings about the issues, as well as to her own artistic concerns at the time. For instance she made many references to making images less easy to read, making the onlooker work harder for the meanings and tricking the eye in the way it perceives things. She said,

“... and likewise with this sort of gender-ish symbol, you might find ways of making some symbols making people work harder for them... you know, something at one... something at one remove somehow/ this looks like a dead foetus, erm in the centre and... if you intend it to be shadowy, maybe you could find ways of making it even more shadowy and secret so that you might overlay glazing over so there is a bit of visual work for the onlooker to do/ Bonnard, didn't always define edges... you could think about having similar imagery, but playing around with not defining an edge, maybe using another white, so a figure like that gets very lost. ”

This is a strong theme throughout the interview, and relates interestingly to statements Joy made in the previous interviews about coming out and passing. Therefore, as well as seeing these comments as potentially good suggestions for ways of moving my work on as an artist, I believed they were also subtle ways of challenging the ways I had interpreted and represented her previous material, and negotiations of how this could be improved.



Another theme in Joy's narrative was the aesthetic response to the paintings' lack of fluidity and cohesion, and her repeated suggestion that I re-work them with more blended forms, more integration of components and more subtlety in line, outline, surface and tone. She said this of 'Key to love',

"Yes, you've split it, but I'm wondering whether you might join it too. You could look at how to transform the blue into khaki by moving the brush strokes up and down, so you're looking at ways of separating and unifying in a metaphorical way, which is not necessarily literal..."

This theme was particularly interesting in terms of Joy's ongoing narrative through the study of her mother's mental ill health, and her experiences of managing multiple personalities which were split. Joy's intention of some day writing a book, and her narrative of understanding the past, healing and reconciliation fits somewhat with the desire for splitting to be transformed into blended and integrated forms once it has been acknowledged. In her first interview with me Joy added to her transcript the following: "I am no longer an adolescent or a child save in spirit, so the 'Grand Design' Philosophies hold meaning for me, particularly since part of my life's work has been to bond people (myself too) to the best of my ability." This too appeared to inform her responses to the paintings, while recourse to previous interview transcripts facilitated with the process of data analysis.

Antonia, who was less familiar with responding in this way to visual images, used a combination of description and interpretation when talking about the paintings. It was clear which images had the most resonance for her, as she would confidently offer her own interpretations without seeking reassurance from me that she was on the right lines. However, she described the individual components of some images, as if trying to make sense of the whole by identifying its parts, but never actually managing to, and I believe she found less resonance with these images. About 'Symbols' she said,

"...loads of symbols on this one, that I took out of the picture and tried to make sense of what they meant. These cut out people, you used to do them as a kid at school and you cut them out with scissors, do you know what I mean, you kind of do one and then you open it up and you've got a row of them, I thought of togetherness but they're not joining hands there, and



erm... I've got men and women joined together, and I've got a woman with scales which could represent Libra, the birth sign, or justice it could represent, and I've got a man err... a chequer board so that could be a winning post, and I've got a woman, who's a woman, Christian, and I had values, because she's got this fish symbol on the front which is another Christian symbol and a cross, and I've got a man that's a medic, you know they've all got symbols, and they're all sort of linked but not linked in a way..."

Whereas in contrast, she made this response to 'Jigsaw',

"this one I put erm, at the top I put jigsaw, interlocking pieces, perhaps representing togetherness, maybe representing family, but separate, all in separate boxes, but they were also different, and they were all happy, all sort of happy and quite... you know the white daisies and... they're all interlocking as well, because you had an interlocking theme going around it as well, string or loops or paper clip type things, but they're also linked, and the arms are linking do you know what I mean?"

While this did not seem apparent to Antonia, who appeared to lack confidence in her responses, her ability to 'read' certain images more easily than others indicated where she had made a personal connection, and this seemed to facilitate her challenging and negotiating with these images. The paintings which she found more inaccessible to interpret, she similarly found difficult to offer suggestions for adaptation or change. However, as there were seven paintings this did not present as an issue, as she simply gave more detailed and colourful responses to the images she had most resonance with.

The question of where the meaning of an art work lies did emerge during the process of the interviews. Both participants appeared to view the work as more or less 'about me' and thus put my life central to the responses they made, despite my attempts to encourage them to work from their own perspectives. Antonia in particular wanted me to tell her the 'real' meaning of each painting after she had shared her ideas with me, and often said she found it difficult to say what she thought a painting was about because she didn't know who the characters in it were. Throughout the interviews I tried to encourage the participants to validate their own views above mine, and emphasised that it was individual interpretations that I was interested in, rather than a group consensus on meaning. While this was difficult to manage within the interviews, it did not prove to be



a problem in terms of the data collected, as the participants did make their own interpretations about the images, albeit in sometimes tentative ways. While some of the participants' statements may have been an attempt to make sense of my life as they believed it to be expressed in the images, the participants simultaneously had to draw upon their own experiences, and thus their own beliefs, ideas and feelings, and these came through in the interviews. Thus the meaning the participants invested in certain images, or aspects of an image, offered insight into their perspectives on the issues in question in the images. For instance, about 'Protection' Joy said

“...and this chain this time is the umbilical cord isn't it, well it looks like an umbilical cord... /But I love this sort of Chagally floating man, who I don't know, is your father.”

I had made no comment about my understanding of the image, and thus the interpretation of the Celtic band as an umbilical cord, and the floating man as a father, come directly out of the participant's understanding of these relationships and their significance. This is born out by the two participants' very different interpretations of the same images. To stick with 'Protection', Joy said

“I like this sort of snakey tongue... it doesn't look like an unkind snake though, it almost looks like a sort of you know, magical communication that's being effected there”

while Antonia constructed a very different meaning saying

“I thought it was a man intruding through this opening... /and there was this woman protecting herself from outside with this baby... and she looked to be pushing away through the opening and he looked as though he was intruding through with this forked tongue...”

Thus the participants' personal interpretations came through, and this further illuminated their thinking about the issues expressed in the paintings as derived from previous interviews. In terms of the ways in which the images worked to create a more interactive consultation experience for the participants, this resonates with researchers working in an



oral history tradition, who explore the construction and expression of identities through individual accounts of the past. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy states,

“Thus oral histories, if sensitively used, can provide a window into how individuals understand and interpret their lives.” (1998:351)

Had Judy Weisner been asked, she might have made a similar statement about the use of photographs in therapy and I too believe that the responses the participants made to the images illuminated the ways in which the participants understood and interpreted their lives, in ways more powerful than the conceptual map ever did.

### **The quality of the feedback.**

The process of consultation was so important in the study, as it was central to working anti-oppressively, in terms of allowing the participants to respond meaningfully to the conclusions I was generating. Thus using paintings as a medium for consultation was tried as a means of finding a more effective way of engaging the participants than the conceptual map had been. This became a central aspect of the study as the methodology came to represent the content of the research, in that both became about active participation. The participants views about their experiences of participation in social life began to influence the ways in which I thought about their participation in the research, and I began to work towards ways of making that participation more like the models they were articulating as desirable. Thus their active engagement was necessary, in order to begin to shift the ownership and control over conclusions and meanings away from the researcher and back onto the participants. When the conceptual map failed to facilitate this process, the search began for more empowering media of communication and consultation.

The result of using paintings was successful in that it enabled the participants to respond from their own frame of reference, to conclusions which were more broadly stated and thus more open to interpretation and challenge. The outcome of this process was that a further layer of complexity on the conclusions already drawn from the data was added, which did more than merely confirm the directions the researcher was taking the



study in. Instead, the participants challenged the conclusions drawn and restated their own, while responding emotionally to the images and providing more data to move the study forward. Thus, the process of consultation was re-negotiated as something dynamic and challenging, where the participants were able to re-work the conclusions drawn by the researcher, while at the same time adding another layer of texture and depth to the emerging picture of information about self and identity. Thus the process of consultation shifted and took on the role of identifying new questions to be explored as directed by the participants; of adding complexity and detail to the picture developing out of the study as a whole, rather than merely confirming what was there; and reformulating and re-presenting the issues more within the frame of reference of the participants.

This was important as methodologically it moved the study nearer to the ideal of anti-oppressive practice, as I believed that the participants had been meaningfully consulted in a way which allowed them to express disagreement and challenge as well as affirmation of the conclusions I had been drawing. It was possible from the transcripts to identify the ways in which the participants actively engaged in negotiating meaning and representation, and took some control of the statements being made about the study. Joy said

“and as, I mean, when large paintings were first important to do, one did them, you know, and I do do very large paintings myself, but I also think there’s a case for varying and playing about with scale, so that’s another way of looking at, I mean, say you use that head, you could actually make a series, you know, of thoughtful countenances, you know, and exploring ideas of gender and identity through that transformation, there’s lots of ways of doing that... one might be mapping the process of work with a colour copier, so that you can transform the image, colour copy it, transform it again, colour copy it again...”

while Antonia said,

“I just took in the scene, and I saw the priest and the happy man, and I looked at this woman and I thought she was quite an introverted woman, she had this all seeing eye peeking out of herself, although she was in herself but she was looking out through different means, and I saw... the [green] hand which looked quite sort of sinister, ... I saw the priest and I put ‘mask’... /and so it looks spiritual because it’s a holy mass thing, but then I thought it’s confusing



because babies, naked women, naked men, God, the church, sex, there is a confusion between God and sex... ... /churches are also very very ambivalent... I wanted to delve in, what does God mean to you?"

Thus the process of consultation became more than a process of validation of *my* conclusions, but moved *as well* into the realm of negotiating and *actively constructing* meanings, adding complexity, asking new questions and moving the study on into new directions.

### **Responding as an artist.**

One of the most fascinating aspects of using the images as a tool for reporting back to the participants was the way in which it stimulated the participants to respond in kind with images, artefacts, text and other cultural products. It appeared on one level that my own use of images gave the participants permission to do the same, and both Joy and Antonia shared other works of art with me in the process of their being consulted. It was clear from the interviews that this process of responding engaged the participants in making connections between the paintings and more familiar things from the realm of their own experience, and putting these together to make some meaning of the images, many of which were quite complex. Antonia for instance picked up on certain symbols and began by working with their personal significance. For Antonia, resonance with certain symbols seemed to facilitate access into the work as a whole, and following meaning made from particular motifs a whole train of thought developed out of and away from the image. Of 'Key to love' she said,

"the woman looks quite worried, and erm the man looks quite happy, and I noticed that he has a key hole, but the woman in her section has no key hole, she's got a key but no key hole, and also her boundaries are thick chains, whereas the man, where the key hole is, has got, the links are broken, and I thought that he could get out of the chains that held him, I just felt that the woman was very caught... /I think he's more dominant and she's more underneath isn't she as opposed to something, the key hole out... and that lead me on to wanting to draw the picture..."



This developed into an in-depth elaboration on an image which she had drawn as a response back to me and from it, it is clear that her thought trains have gone beyond my work and very much into her own network of understanding of the body of images and the study as a whole. She gave me her own sketch (appendix J) and talked me through her thinking behind it. She said,

“I saw it as you and I drew the picture of a woman holding a key in one hand and a baby in the other with an open door behind her, so you could see the key hole and through the open door, and I wanted to have all the pictures behind her, you know the daisy one, the daisy flowers, I picked up something from each of the pictures, erm there was the daisy pictures, which I thought of as a happy symbol. there was the hands, which I think was in... yeah the hands, instead of having the stone and the candle I had the key and the baby... erm... through the open door it was emm, I wanted to show it as a happy world, and there was children`s playing fields in there, and there`s birds in it and a sun, and when I look at it I would alter it, I didn`t have the door big enough, I need to have it more ajar so you can see more of the happy scene in the background, erm and there`s, all your pictures are all done in squares, and I decided I wanted to put it in a circle, and err a lot of the pictures have chains, boundaries, but I didn`t want mine to be bounded right round, I wanted mine to have arrows, perhaps pointing and going upwards, sort of moving, not narrow. And I put these people, the heads, watching, the two people being mum and dad, people that are behind you, and drawing a picture with your eyes open. I wanted to draw, when I looked at all these pictures I wanted to draw you a happy private place, with your own key and the open door... and the arrows to show movement... direction.”

While Antonia would probably not refer to herself as an artist of any kind, it was clear here that she was responding to the images *as an artist* in terms of her responses, how she had thought about things, and the way in which she had assembled pieces from each of the paintings to form her own which more closely represented her own vision. This seemed to be particularly empowering in terms of facilitating the expression of one`s own meanings, and this was done in the context of responding to a researcher`s own conclusions. This again lead me to think quite differently about ‘participation’ within research, and I felt that this process had allowed Antonia to truly ‘participate’ meaningfully in the negotiation of meanings drawn out of her own data, as she had been able to take my interpretations, and reconfigure them in her own image, thus for her creating a ‘truer’ representation.



Making reference to other images was a feature of both interviews, and something which I particularly enjoyed, as it felt that the participants needed to use the same forms and media as I had in order to make an adequate response. In this sense then, the participants were responding as artists to the work which I, as an artist had presented to them. Joy made reference to many works by other artists, having a selection of books out when I arrived to do the interview with pages marked, in order to be able to explain precisely what she meant. For instance in helping me to understand her comments about 'Contradiction' she said,

“...this one here, which is the... Diego Rivera, there's more form in that head, but the way the images are put together... are rather similar, and we're looking, the Diego Rivera we're looking at is 'the Allegory of California' in which again has a banner like quality.”

This sharing of images was a very productive source of visual response to my work as it introduced another huge range of meanings contained within the images offered, to work alongside the verbal responses. This therefore added to the weight of the data gathered, and raised interesting questions of myself as a researcher analysing visual data and making interpretations of it, in contrast to the reasons the participants had for sharing the images with me. In that sense, it put me in the same place as the participants had been in during the interviews, having to draw on my own understanding and invest part of my self, to make sense of the visual information which had been shared with me. This felt like an exciting reversal of roles, and one in which I had to work with more than just the spoken word in terms of data.

David Best (1992) recognises this style of response to art works as significant and important in terms of finding adequate means of expressing ideas and opinions. He argues that using other art works when responding may be the best way of conveying an idea, and indeed may powerfully communicate new understanding. He states,

“Reasons in the arts may not be exclusively verbal. One's interpretations and evaluation of a work may be given in various other ways, and especially through the particular artistic medium, perhaps by comparisons and contrasts. For example, a musician might help us to understand an interpretation of a piece by playing certain passages with particular emphases, or with subtleties



of phrasing, which cast a different light on the piece as a whole... A painter might show how a different use of colour might bring about a significant effect on a painting. Indeed, there are numerous and various non-verbal ways in which understanding can be shown and achieved in life generally.” (1992:42)

The participants each responding as an artist was a particularly good example of this, and a stimulating aspect of this stage of consultation and data collection, as it allowed them increased ownership of the approach, enabling them to work in the same way as I, as researcher, had done. Using images to indicate the ways in which my paintings could be changed to better represent their truths enabled the participants to own the images by exerting some control over them and their future development. This seemed to be closely connected to the central theme of the study which has been how people identify and represent themselves. Therefore by working as artists; individuals who actively construct meaning in a social and cultural product, the participants actively indicated how their own sense of selves should currently be represented.

### **Challenging.**

The intention of this part of the study was to explore the potential for art works to convey ideas to the participants and open up the discursive space for those ideas to be challenged and alternatives constructed. As I have shown above, this worked in many ways, as suggestions to improve the images, alternatives, and re-workings were all offered during the interviews, as well as personal interpretations of the images which added to the depth of the data already collected. The processes of negotiation I went through with the participants in terms of what the issues were and how selves were represented was a key feature of the interviews at this stage. The discussion focused around ways of more adequately representing what the participants perceived the images to be about, and Joy put it succinctly as to whether the images “worked” or not. Initially, again, this felt like a tutorial, but something much more subtle was going on. By making suggestions on areas where the images didn’t ‘work’, and ways of rectifying this, Joy communicated a framework by which the images could come to more accurately represent what the study was about for her, and therefore be more representative of her perception of the issues.



She recognised that the paintings were not about *her*, but about the process of coming to understand and represent ideas. After the interview, in one of her correspondences she wrote of the paintings: “I didn’t recognise my brushstrokes or imagery at all because they were not there... it was easy for me to come in and offer ideas.” However, the ideas which were offered were intended as advice to develop the paintings into images which ‘worked’. Whether ‘working’ was experienced on a personal or aesthetic level, I believed that this again was evidence of the discursive space in the consultation process to challenge, change and adapt the paintings to make them more compatible with an individual view. This is visible in Joy’s comments about a number of paintings, where she says

“I wondered whether you might ever consider making transformational heads, a bit like Bacon, so that you’ve got the sense of sort of emotion passing through countenance in a strange painterly way... /I’m just wondering whether you could do some more unusual things with the surface thinking about sort of childhood maybe... and maybe abrading part of the surface and adding to it, something like that you know... /the flesh colours used, you could muck around with that. Get your Itten out and play with actually changing the colours of these people’s faces...”

However, the process of reformulating the paintings was most clearly evidenced in her response to ‘Denial’ which very clearly didn’t ‘work’ for her as an image. However, through giving it time and consideration, she began to find a way in which it would work, which involved cutting off the two opposite portraits to isolate the central section of intertwining bodies. She said

“oddly enough this shape without these heads works, but then that loses the dual identity so would that mean therefore... if we actually, in a funny kind of way, if you took the portraits away, what you’ve got in the center is quite a sophisticated symbol, which says everything you want to say. The only problem is this bloomin’ little baby because you don’t know which way to turn him up, so you’d have to... use maybe, that other lovely little gender symbol, the yin yang.”



This seemed such an important instance of the type of negotiation which was made possible by this way of working that I worked on the computer with the scanned image of ‘Denial’ and created something close to what Joy described (appendix B).

Antonia also challenged in this way but less frequently and with less confidence, and chose the types of symbols I had used as an area for change, rather than the ways in which I had manipulated the form and media. She said this about ‘Contradiction’,

“you know we were speaking before about art being a cultural pursuit, erm... now if you’d done a headmaster at the top of there, erm, he’s another sort of male figure... ... if you went to a school with a head master you might also see all sorts of things in there, and you would do that through education but because you... you... you erm... bring out your thoughts and feelings in a cultural way, maybe that’s why you saw it as the church”

However, these interventions were just as determined as Joy’s in terms of making the images ‘work’ and demonstrated her commitment to being active in the process of meaning construction. Therefore the consultation format facilitated meaningful challenging of the conclusions I had drawn, which was particularly valuable in terms of shifting the author-ity of the researcher more onto the participants.

### **Questions for further consideration.**

Through reflecting on the process of this third stage of interviewing, I felt that it offered the participants a greater opportunity to reconstruct, challenge, define and shape the interpretations which I had made in response to their data than the ‘map’ did. At this stage I tentatively considered whether this was possible due to the data being presented in visual form, which culturally gave it the appearance of having more unlimited possibilities of meaning than if it had been in written form. While theorists of semiotics may disagree, arguing that through connotation and denotation words have a wide range of potential interpretations, I would argue that culturally, we are conditioned to believe in the determinacy and authority of words, particularly in their written form, and their largely unambiguous nature. Therefore, from this perspective, it is conceptually more difficult to



challenge what is perceived as fixed meaning, and therefore one's own alternative interpretations may be seen as invalid and remain unarticulated.

Images, on the other hand, I believe are culturally seen as less fixed in terms of shared meaning, and a range of interpretations, within a set of realistic parameters, are permissible. Images perhaps have greater potential for ambiguity as there is not a dictionary within which to find a set of culturally shared definitions of the various elements which go together to make the whole. In terms of my paintings, the participants may have had to do some work in order to make meanings of them which they could articulate, but with this came a situation in which they were less constrained by limitations of meaning than they had been when analysing the 'map'. Therefore, at this stage there was a greater opportunity for active construction of personal meaning, as well as the possibility to push one's own thinking on, taking risks and moving into new territory. This then meant that, while it might have been an uncomfortable process, working directly from one's own immediate response enabled the participants to exert more control and agency over the representations in terms of defining self and identifying inaccuracies.

However, this theory about the assumed ambiguity of images in comparison with words may in fact depend on the nature of the text and whether it is readerly or writerly (Sumara & Luce-Kappler:1993). A writerly text may be deliberately created with spaces in it, into which the reader is invited to write, thus making consumption a more interactive and active experience. This type of text would require the reader to actively work whilst reading to make personal meaning of the text, as a coherent fixed meaning would not be offered by the author. Thus such a text may create much room for interpretation, whether it be in visual or written form. In contrast a readerly text might govern the reader's experience, allowing little room for personal interpretation. Thus my supposition that images are more open to interpretation than words in our culture may perhaps be inaccurate. Within the study then, I began to question whether the images worked better than the 'map' because they were images as opposed to words, or because their meanings were more open to interpretation, while the map reduced the interpretative possibilities. I thus took this question away into the next stage of data analysis, in terms of exploring the possibility of creating a more flexible *written* text, and exploring the impact of using this as a tool for consulting with participants.



A further question I began to grapple with at this stage of the process was the location of meaning of a work of art. Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kappler (1993) argue that meaning is created in the interchange between the text, the author and the reader, and thus is not fixed, but is created in the process of consumption. However, the participants, particularly Antonia, were quite resistant to the notion that as the artist I did not have a more privileged view on the meaning of the paintings than they did, and were sometimes frustrated that I would not share the 'true' meaning with them. I thus began to consider the roles of the author, the text and the audience in the process of meaning construction and raised questions about the relative weighting of these roles and the influential factors which mediate meaning construction.

These issues lead me on to consider where ownership lies in terms of the creation of art works and their meanings. This was linked to the shift in my thinking about participation and consultation, where I began to think about the quality of participation and what factors might facilitate better quality involvement. I was anxious throughout the study that the role of the participants and my commitment to working anti-oppressively should be more than just fine sentiments on paper, and thus following the disappointing outcome of the consultation using the map after the first interviews, I worked hard to find an alternative means of encouraging the participants to be more involved and more critical and to assume more ownership over the conclusions drawn about their material. However, I began to realise that this raised significant questions in terms of ownership and *authorship* of the study in terms of the award of the Ph.D. to the recognised researcher only, the level of control and veto over the contents of the thesis which myself and the participants had, and the issue of 'truth(s)' and validity in relation to the different perspectives of the researcher and the participants on the material and conclusions drawn about it. These issues were then taken forward into another reconsideration of 'methodology' and its meanings, and another interrogation of the concept of 'participation'.

With all these questions which the process raised the common denominator was that they were not straightforward issues in any way, and I approached each in different ways. I began a fresh literature search into the issues of meaning and cultural texts, and the roles of artist, text and audience. At the same time I worked on analysing the data which came



out of the interviews where I discussed the paintings with the participants, and experimented with fiction writing as a means of expressing findings through a writerly written text. Finally I worked on the concept of methodology, and looked again at the notion of participation, bringing into consideration the issues of ownership and control, and truth and validity, while out of this came a new look at the ethical values and principles of the study, and a consideration of the development of an anti-oppressive paradigm.

26/5/00

I'm taking two weeks off when Amber and I get the first draft of her thesis handed in, and I'm planning on spending some of my savings and going to Thailand.

I wish you could meet me there?

I know you always wanted to go just like I do.

We could talk... and hang out. I've got so much to tell you, and letters just aren't good enough anymore.

27/5/00

Amber, like me suddenly has a whole new set of questions... which she is burning to have answered. Again, like me. This time she wrote stories to find her answers, and told me to think about what stories I might tell to really convey to someone who I was. I wonder what stories you would have told about me, Andy. So I've started writing a story of my own.



## Chapter 9.

### Writing stories as a form of data analysis.

#### Introduction.

In terms of data collection, the consultation using images had a big impact as what emerged were narratives which clearly articulated the participants' own constructions of themselves, in quite explicit terms. This illuminated the provisional narratives constructed from the earlier interviews which helped me to re-shape my understanding of them, working towards concluding the study. At this stage I worked on developing short fictional stories to explore and represent my understanding of their 'truths' and realities, as expressed through the interviews they had participated in. I did this as a means of drawing together the material from the third interviews, and inter-linking this with all the previous data gathered, in order to create a multifaceted picture of the process of involvement in the research project as a whole. At this stage I also included in the stories an exploration of my own 'truths' and reality about being involved in the study, in terms of what it had meant for me and what I had gained by being involved. This was seen as useful in terms of presenting my voice and perspective equally as one among three who had been involved in the study from its inception, and to illustrate the diverse outcomes which each of us took from our involvement in the same study.

This chapter will explore how fiction was used as a means of analysing data and representing conclusions, and will be organised in the following way:

- A description of **the process** of data analysis using fictional writing.
- A presentation of **the data** through three short stories, prefaced by Sam's own story.
- An analysis of **the issues** which arose during the process, organised under the headings of :
  - Consulting Participants
  - Writerly Texts
  - The Construction of Reality



- Other Fictions.

### The process.

What emerged through consultation via images was a situation whereby the responses given by the participants both re-shaped the interpretations made of the data, and added further complexity to the developing picture. Thus a further process of analysis was needed to assimilate the new material into the study. Data from the previous round of interviewing had been analysed through my art making processes and the seven subsequent paintings produced stood as evidence of the conclusions drawn. Working in this creative way had allowed me to make connections and test out ideas in a radically new way, and the impact of using images to report back to participants proved powerful in terms of the responses elicited. I therefore felt that working in a similarly creative way with the latest set of data would be valuable in terms of the insights I might gain from the analysis, and the potential responses from participants when consulted about their views on them. However, using visual imagery again at this point did not feel appropriate, as I wanted to investigate ways of creating a 'writerly' written text (Sumara & Luce-Kappler:1993), as I had begun to question why the images had worked where the map had failed. While this map was considered appropriate at the time it was produced and used, working with visual images enabled me to identify the power of using alternative forms of communication when reporting back to participants. I was therefore keen to explore to what extent I could create a written text out of the data which would allow the participants as much scope to respond as the paintings had, and what impact this would have in terms of giving feedback to participants and eliciting their responses to it. I was also keen to explore the potential of writing for again refusing the prescriptive ways the participants had been subjected to discourses of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability etc... and the possibility of articulating alternative identities with more empowering potential. Oksala (1998) argued that identity is a function of power which we come to accept as part of our own story about ourselves. I was keen to explore to what extent these stories could be changed to articulate new narratives in alternative ways.

I therefore began with the participants' transcripts and immersed myself within their words and sentences, and I found patterns in the responses which suggested that



certain themes were of particular significance. I examined the themes and the responses within them and teased out maps which plotted the locations of and connections between these themes. I then drew in data from the previous interviews, and used this to create multi-layered points of convergence whereby areas of interest in the latest transcripts took on greater significance through the implications of what had been said previously. This left me with a fluid mass of interrelated parts, which needed structure and cohesion to bring some form of meaning from them. Fiction felt a very natural way of achieving such a demanding task, and skeleton story formats quickly developed by which all the interconnecting fragments could be made into a meaningful body of writing. This involved creating stories about women looking at visual images, and musing on responses to them. Remembrances from the past were incorporated, shedding light on the interpretations being made while also sparking questions for the reader about the significance of what was remembered, and the importance of what was not made explicit in the text. Quotations were included from the transcripts in terms of the responses to the images and the remembrances, as a means of expressing the connections between the different interviews. The stories were set out in overlapping columns down the page to represent the narrative, responses to the images and remembrances, and the overlapping was designed to create multi-level, multi-layered pieces of fiction. I also used a method suggested by Peter Woods (1999) whereby the researcher draws out the key features of a long paragraph in a transcript and uses these to structure a poem which succinctly encapsulates the essence of what the participant was saying. This made sections of the stories more ‘punchy’, and potentially more writerly. These strategies were intended to create layers of meaning for the reader to interpret, while I also used different fonts to create distance between the types of information being given in the separate columns.

One of my main aims was to work in such a way as to merely suggest to the reader what I felt the connections were, in order to empower them to find their own conclusions from the deliberate ambiguity. I felt that fiction as a medium had a very powerful potential to convey meaning on multiple levels, and it was this capacity which I intended to harness. The importance of empowering the reader lay in the philosophy of Postmodernism which has underpinned the study as a whole, whereby individual truths constructed within the process of interaction are valued over a single, pre-existent Truth.



Writing spaces into the narrative within which readers could actively write from their own subject positions, appealed as an adequate means of producing valid and defensible conclusions while at the same time remaining true to the vision the study was based on. Consulting participants about the resonance the story had for them was also intended as a safeguard to prevent the fiction taking over and moving away from the data it was based on.

The creation of fiction as a means of knowing was again based within David Best's (1992) philosophy of the arts as a rational means of understanding one's feelings better. To write one's thoughts is to know them more clearly and deeply, as careful articulation demands sensitive consideration of exactly what one is expressing. I found this particularly relevant when trying to represent the emerging findings within the context of a fictional story, as it was tempting to let the story go off in numerous directions, thus losing its relevance to the data. Thus to carefully check, for instance in one of the stories, that a central theme of Ownership remained intact, not only provided more insight into the theme, but also into the genre of fiction and the ways in which it communicates. To then be able to read back what one has written, and to see subtle nuances of language illuminate ideas in new ways, allowed me as the writer to be educated by the reading process, and for new understandings to emerge. In terms of methodology, I believe this potential for learning is invaluable as it moves the researcher and participants on into new territory, thus creating original knowledge. It is a richly creative process with uncertain outcomes and destinations which adds a dynamism to the study with a propulsive force.

### The data.

At this point in the thesis, Amber wanted to insert her three short stories. While writing them she asked me to think about my story of being involved. I'd never written a story since being back at school, so I was pretty scared. I didn't feel very confident so I started with a story I



remember from when I was little, which Cliff, one of my first foster carers used to tell me...

It started about a boy who liked to be into everything, and was always getting scruffy. Late one weekend as he came home again covered in mud and dust, his mum made him get changed, warning him that he was now in his last set of clean clothes, so to be careful not to get dirty again.

Then came the funny bit and the bit I could never wait to get told... as he was walking along, trying his best to stay clean, he tripped over a match stick (hysterical laughing at this point by me, aged six) and landed in a puddle. He was soaked from head to toe in muddy water! He cried all the way home knowing he would get into trouble with his mum.

But worse than that... because he had no clean clothes at home, he had to put on one of his sister's dresses, and play out in that for the rest of the day.

This was like the bitter ending after the sweet comedy trip, and made me feel anxious inside, but I never really knew why.

Anyway (to finish my story), years later the boy would become a man, and every year at Mardi Gras he would remember the match stick, and the trip, and the muddy water and the dress, as he dragged up to head the Pink Ladies float, lip synch-ing to Gloria Gaynor as the parade progressed along the streets of Sydney. He would smile as he re-called feeling excited by what was supposed to be a punishment, and thankful



for the day when he had understood his calling and embraced a more real picture of himself. And then he would forget again for another year, and enjoy the party atmosphere which would engulf the city for the weekend.

This ending leaves me feeling much less anxious and allows me to adapt and own something destructive which was given to me in all innocence twenty years ago.

Why is it considered so degrading to be a girl anyway?

Amber created her stories from what the participants had told her, and how she herself had felt through being involved in the study. They are called 'Ending', 'Work', and 'Moving', and are contained on the following pages.



## Ending.

"Tell me what you think we've done."

'What do I think we've done?' Amber pondered this as she walked, trancelike, down the street, oblivious within the question she was turning over in her mind. She made her way through the campus, across the courtyard, towards the building which contained the room. A garret at the top of a narrow steep set of stairs. It smelled like the doctor's surgery she had visited as a child, usually, she seemed to recall, for sore throats. The bizarre rag doll on top of the doctor's book case being the reward for getting there and sitting still. Just gazing, never touching, but its wide eyed stitched expression was mesmerising. She wondered if any child got to hold it. Attending *these* sessions elicited similar feelings as then. A sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, a mild panic, feelings of guilt that there may not really be anything wrong with her. 'Hypochondriac'. That smell. It was so evocative every time.

As she crossed the courtyard she glanced at her watch. Snoopy's arms, contorted into twenty to three, brought her back to present reality and made her smile. She thought of her dad and being six. But she was early. The sense of panic grew, the nausea increased. What would she say first? Why was the first bloody sentence so difficult? Blushing madly, making and withdrawing eye contact, non-verbally pleading for help and receiving none. Mind racing, wondering what type of power games were going on, berating herself for this lack of trust after what had been more than a year, then becoming six again, and in a little girl voice saying 'I don't know what to say', smiling shyly and hoping she looked cute. She hated that though; being instantly disempowered, and having to work for the rest of the session to assert herself out of the hole she'd withdrawn into. 'I'll not do that today.' : faltering determination. 'I'll stride in, maintain eye contact, and ask what he thought of last week. Ask how *he* is.' She wondered if interaction were possible without games.

Amber, this woman in her mid twenties, had been attending sessions at the university counselling service for eighteen months. What had started out as a block of six weekly sessions had developed into fortnightly meetings, punctuated occasionally by



temporary endings, to provide time for reflection and to establish distance. Amber was ambivalent about attending but kept returning, intrigued to obsession by the relationship she had developed with her counsellor, and the issues she was slowly addressing through the process. The mirrors held up before her were nauseating yet addictive. However, this was to be the last, *ever*, session together. Amber had returned after the Christmas break convinced that now she had reached some sort of resolution to key issues in her life, she wanted some respite from what she had experienced as almost constant emotional bombardment. He had validated this, then told her it was excellent timing as he was leaving shortly to take up employment elsewhere. This was ok, but it niggled her that it stole her thunder from striking out of the relationship on her own.

She sat in the courtyard, rehearsing the first few words she would say on entering the room, and drifted back into reflection on the question he had posed her last time. "Maybe you could use next time to tell me what you think we've done... almost by way of evaluation." She thought right back to the beginning. How she felt then, as if she were drowning. How the doctor had read all her physical symptoms as 'stress leading to depression'. The alarm at being offered medication or psychiatric treatment. She'd left without finding out what each of these options entailed and instead sought out help for herself. And here she still was, being helped, although as *she* saw it, doing all the work and finally getting the credit. She recalled the 'purple sparrow' dream which had occurred very early on, and how they had kept coming back to it until she could move on from feeling upset, and use it to influence her choices. She was sure this change was something they had achieved together, yet today the recollection brought her right back to the edge of tears. Sunglasses on, in February.

"I had been wanting a pet. I considered a dog, but knew that working long shifts would be cruel for it. I thought of ferrets. Then one day I found a purple sparrow in the road. Not a dazzling purple, but a muddy, dull, dusty purple. I picked it up and took it home, satisfied that I had found the ideal pet but I felt guilty about caging it. When I told my dad, the bubble burst. He said, "did you not think of waiting for something better to come along?" The sinking feeling could have dragged me down through the bed it was



so physical and intense. I never looked at the purple sparrow in the same way again after that."

It was pathetic when she looked back. She believed now that she had known all the answers even then, but was too weak and scared to admit to them. To come out into the reality that was just *too* wrong and to say 'well tough, this is me'. And so she had embarked on this long journey of discovery, desperately trying to find an alternative which would be more acceptable, would fit, and would finally feel okay. She recalled the fantasy of the Sunday afternoon when finally her mind would have nothing more pressing to do than fall asleep in front of an innocent thirties musical on TV, body full of chocolate, coffee and port. Just like with dad when the football had been on terrestrial television and the grandparents had been taken home after a roast chicken dinner. But she hadn't been able to relax since she was fifteen. There had always been stuff to do which had to take precedence over everything else, and yet she had never achieved the sense of satisfaction she strove towards. There was still a hole that needed to be filled, and this, she knew, was just another exhausting part of that.

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There had been months and months of frustration. Amber had felt as though she was going round in circles, always coming back to the same place and always being faced with the persistent inadequacy of it. She perceived this now as 'being in denial', and as trying to shape herself to fit a location which was not her own. However, the rapport was developing between herself and her counsellor, and she found it was a productive if painful media through which to work. She was suddenly challenged in new and exciting ways and she took off after this rare opportunity and allowed it to dominate her consciousness to the exclusion of most other things. Now, by suddenly analysing in retrospect the journey they had been on together, Amber could see more clearly the directions they had taken, as if looking back on a field of fresh snow and seeing the patterns made by the butch tread on the heavy boots she wore. (She could easily have made the analogy of footprints in sand, but the religious connotations stemming from the time of being on the margins of the born-again cult were too sickly. No-one carried her.) She smiled. The first six months had been a joke. Trying to convince herself and everybody else that the label fitted, actually doing a pretty good



job, but waking up one day feeling more alienated from herself than she would ever have believed possible and thinking 'shit, what now?'

Snoopy indicated that it was nearly time. Amber walked towards the door, which lead into the corridor, which would take her to the door at the bottom of the staircase which smelled of the doctors.

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It had become really exciting when he suggested doing 'guided imagery'. She guessed he was as frustrated as her at the constant re-covering of old ground, and that this was a desperate attempt at mixing things up a bit. She was pleased, as she still felt a responsibility to shine and entertain at every session. To never let him down. To sustain the image she believed she had cultivated of herself for him. But the process had scared the shit out of both of them and they had stopped after the second attempt. This was before he knew she was an artist, and she guessed the perversity of her visual imagination had freaked him a bit and left her feeling lost. But it had opened her eyes to the truth she had been burying for the last six months. For the last ten years?

C: okay, close your eyes and just concentrate on your breathing. Focus on each part of your body in turn. Just be aware of it, touching the chair, your feet on the floor, your breathing in and out. Now imagine you are in a field. Picture the field in your mind and feel what it's like to be in that field. Can you describe it to me?

A: it's long and narrow, with really high grasses and full of poppies. If I stand up these come over my head. I'm little, about six in a summer dress and buckle shoes and it's a nice day with a bit of a breeze.

C: what are its borders like?

A: quite high prickly bushes, like hawthorn or something.



C: what do you want to do?

A: walk through the field. No-one will see me because the grass is so tall. I want to get to the fence at the far end.

C: okay... Are you there yet?

A: yes.

C: can you imagine a little hole in the fence just small enough to squeeze through? Can you push your way through it?

A: yes

C: what can you see now?

A: there is just a ledge, about a foot wide to stand on, and beyond it is a steep cliff edge with a drop of hundreds of feet. You can see the bottom, but it's very very far away.

C: what can you see if you look from right to left?

A: nothing, just the ledge running right along.

C: what do you want to do?

A: look over the edge

C: is it safe?

A: no. I need big shoes which are weighted down, so I can peer over but not fall. And then even if the wind blows I'll be okay.

C: can you imagine you've got those shoes on?

A: yes

C: how do you feel?

A: I want to take my shoes off and jump

C: have you got a parachute?

A: no, I just want to jump

C: there are lots of ways to get down. We could look at some of them.



A: I just want to jump

C: I can't keep you safe if you jump

A: ...

C: can I bring you back to the field now?

A: I want to stay here for a minute. I just want to know what it feels like. It's like being on the edge of the world. It feels amazing. It feels as if I'm filling up with air and I'll just take off any minute. These shoes won't keep me here. I'll just drift up and be blown over, and then I'll be free falling. Can I stay here for a second?

C: do you want me to stay?

A: no I'll be back in a minute.

That was the beginning for Amber. It opened an eye inside her which had been selotaped shut forever. When she opened her eyes on finally returning to the room from the guided imagery they were full of tears. She had wondered if he thought she was suicidal, but the intensity of the revelation had been too powerful to share straight away to reassure him.

As Amber rang the bell to alert him to the fact she was there and that she would be ascending the steep narrow stairs any minute, she thought of the gradual change after the 'cliff' session, and how she had started to distance herself from the fantasy of Amber she had created in everybody else. It was so liberating to move away from the restrictive picture of herself. The smell, and the greasy olive green carpet made her think of the doctors again. 'There's nothing wrong with me.' This, she thought, was progress.

'I just need help believing it.'

She panicked at the thought of never seeing him again. There was so much to achieve in this ending.

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Amber sat down and smiled. He looked nice, a new, smarter suited look since landing the promotion elsewhere, and a beard like her dad's. They got on, and this made her feel quite safe, and warm. She had mascara on. A sure sign that she was determined not to cry today. The first sentence strangely came easily, but despite the security she was on the defensive. She needed to know why talking about her paintings had made him so uncomfortable, especially when starting painting again had been such a crucial aspect of her authentic re-creation. This part of her had felt rejected and she had struggled with that, as usually this would have caused her to modify herself to please other people. However, in this process she was trying to discover what pleased herself. He seemed a bit thrown by the question. Had she been too aggressive? In true counsellor style he reflected it back at her and she twisted uncomfortably in her chair as she considered why it mattered what he thought. Amber knew that endorsement was a huge thing for her, and that she was still struggling to elevate her own opinion over that of everyone else who mattered to her. She remembered the book she had recently read about women and eating, and the article which had said that being under the control of somebody else was shown both through conforming and rebellion. She felt she oscillated wildly between the two and was sickened by it. She also thought it was a bit late in the day to start bringing this up, so she went back to thinking about the painting.

He never knew that it had originally, way back, started out as a gift, for a partner, who she had felt overwhelmed by. The day a friend had said that it was like Amber giving herself as an offering to him had been the day it changed direction for the first time. It was going to be a life size portrait, 'nude sitting on a chair'. Her friend's comment had frightened her. Was this what it had come to, the relationship she was trapped inside. A last desperate attempt to be acceptable, 'here, just have all of me'. The painting was abandoned, to be picked up again in the process of healing following the break up, during which time Amber worked slowly towards being able to label it as abusive. The woman in the image became tied to the chair, and then it was abandoned again. It was two years later, in the middle of her counselling, when a resolution to the painting emerged. It had lived, rolled up under the stairs, as a testimony to how weak and vulnerable she was, and to how trust was not an option for the future. However, as she had begun to examine and question the chains which held her to an identity which



was not her own, she had also subconsciously been considering the chair which she was tied to. The knots in the ropes were of her own making, yet eventually she had found the courage to untie them, to stretch out her arms, to open her legs and plant her feet firmly on the floor, and to look directly at all the people she had been so scared of. Scared of upsetting and alienating. And so the painting had unfolded like a daisy in the sunshine and marked another epiphany.

She decided to try another tack with him to get an answer. ‘Did you see Alanis Morissette on Behind the Music on VH-1 last night? She was saying that when she brought out her first album it was like her first opportunity to tell *her* truth, but she was so afraid that the people close to her wouldn’t want to hear it, because it didn’t correspond to what their idea of her truth was. And her dad just said, “is that how you feel?” and she said “yes” and he said “okay”, and it was like they accepted it. You should have seen her smile when she told it. I knew why she was smiling. I wanted it to be okay to put that painting out there.’ Amber let him process this for a minute and thought of the paintings which followed, as if the floodgates which had been holding back the reality she had never really acknowledged had just been opened, and the images which captured bits of what that was like just gushed into her head and got channelled onto canvasses. She had finally begun to accept the answers to the questions she had been asking, and she was carried along on a train which seemed to offer her a new way of being.

‘Do you remember the helicopter dream I told you about? It was like being reborn. Like that was the consequence of going off the cliff. Arms Wide Open was the point in between. The moment when I lost faith but found me.’

I dreamt I was inside a helicopter. I wasn't flying it, I was sitting in the back, and it was made of a very shiny black metal, with those windows which you can see out of but no-one else can see in. The helicopter started spinning around, out of control, and I thought 'I'm going to die here.' It was weird because then I took a deep breath and just regained control. I thought, 'if I'm going to die I want to experience every bit of it. I don't want to miss any, panicking. I want to know what it feels like. To experience everything right up to



the last minute.' I knew we would either crash or explode into flames. I wondered which would hurt most. I thought of an explosion, my body torn apart and individual limbs plopping to the ground. I wondered if I'd be engulfed by flames. Then it ended. And that was life, over.

Amber remembered that it wasn't long after this that she jumped for real, and was still glad she had.

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As the session wore on Amber became increasingly hot and panicked as she realised it was time to come out to him. What would he think? Would he reject her? Think she was less of a person than he had before? Think she had no reason being there? Question her motives for doing what she was doing? Feel hurt at not having been told before? It was such a maze of potential feelings, not all of which Amber could withstand if they were unleashed on her. She knew she had come a hell of a long way in the past eighteen months, and that she was stronger, more authentic to herself and happier than she had ever been, but she still had problems completely validating her choices. Her eternal purple sparrow. Her spine didn't feel strong enough yet to back her in the face of disapproval from those people whose opinion mattered. She was nervous. The worst thing he could do was question her authenticity and integrity. She was clinging on to this newly accepted truth by her fingernails as she had rejected and buried it that often and for so long. She wasn't confident at all yet in defending it to scepticism.

She began by answering his question

'Do you know what I think we've done together, over the past eighteen months? I think we've found a way of identifying the non-authentic parts of who I was, and replaced them with stuff that's real and actually feels like it fits. You've probably seen more of me than anybody else has, because you've been the medium through which I've been able to sort all this stuff out. I've brought all my stuff here and gone through it all with you. I've had the time to sort stuff out which I've just ignored until now. We looked at my abuse



together. You helped me to validate something which I referred to as 'only this' or 'just that', and let me get angry about it and grieve about it and then put it away. We looked at locating emotional pain in food and eating and we've found a way for me to feel really bad without bingeing, and be thin and healthy without an emotional cost. And we've looked at my ways of interacting and found more empowering relationships and less manipulative ways of getting my needs met. I feel as if I've been growing up and moving on, and you might not even realise that we've achieved all this stuff together, because I know I talk in riddles sometimes and hide real things inside pretend things, and then shock you by coming out in a dramatic way seemingly out of the blue, but that's just how I am. And I just want to say thank you for being there for me, even when I've used you, and hurt you, when I've ignored you and then paid so much attention to you it's become an obsession. I needed you in my life so much and you were always there for me. I know you're going to say it was me who did all the work, and in a sense you're right, but I needed you there to hang all the work on, to structure it and to make sense of it. The reason it is so good is because of you. And I'm sorry but I'm nearly ready to walk away now. You've equipped me with the skills and the courage I need to keep going, and I've found someone who recognises every aspect of me, validates it and encourages me to express it. But it's you that made this relationship possible, enabled me to know and like myself and therefore to be able to love someone. I've never loved anybody. You were always honest enough with me to tell me that what we had wasn't enough to settle for. Was just a way of getting to where I wanted to be. It wasn't a destination in itself. And you're right. I just want to end this well now, and get on with living. Because there is finally so much I want to do.'

This was an important speech for Amber. It was rare for her to be able to tell someone directly how she felt about them, but this too was improving with practice in the new life she had developed.

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Amber spent the next few minutes washing the mascara down her cheeks with tears, as he validated all of what she had said. She knew it was time to tell him and it felt okay. She wasn't six now, she was twenty seven and finally able to speak her truth confidently.

My partner, did I tell you I had a partner? I think I hinted at it. But I was playing the pronouns game when you keep their gender secret. Well, he's a man. It's a he, and it's wonderful. You might be thinking 'bisexual' but don't. I've left the need for labels behind. Nothing imprisoned me more than identifying as a lesbian and I'm not prepared to swap one cage for another. This is what we've done together. Got me here, and I'm happy, relaxed and confident. It finally fits. The inside and the outside finally congruent. One covers the other so they both disappear and something else is there instead. It's perfect.

Amber left the office after a hug and the exchange of talismans. A spear shaped gem stone richer, a painting with outstretched arms poorer. But definitely richer.



## Work.

It was a rare morning off from the demands of work, studies and home, and she sat in the conservatory of the local botanical gardens, bathed in the September sunshine intensified through the glass roof. Deep in concentration, Amber sucked on the end of her pen carefully considering how best to get over the barrier of the blank page which prevented her spilling her thoughts out onto it. This was only the third time she had sat down to write her story, and she still found it difficult to find a starting point to fruitfully lead her through the next three hours. She balanced two books on her knee. The first a plain A4 note pad, narrow lined with a margin and as yet exceedingly blank, the second a notebook, bulging and misshapen with found curiosities, with a battered black, hard backed cover. Both books were crucial to her writing process. Onto the lined paper went thoughts shaped by the conventions of writing. Into the notebook tumbled precious raw ideas and recollections which needed developing before being incorporated into the main body of work.

Thinking about the Ph.D. half written gave Amber a sinking feeling. She had received some stuff through the post from her book club a couple of weeks earlier about Goddess spiritual guides, and with the International Women's Day meal she had been invited to approaching she wished she had had enough time to study it, so she could take it and share it with the others. Instead she had a thesis to write. Forcing herself through the barrier of fear encapsulated by the stark page, she put pen to paper...

### Chapter One.

On this morning, as with many others, the kitchen lay as the only evidence of disorganisation hidden within the otherwise immaculate tidiness of the suburban four bedroom semi. Kali, a woman in her twenties, surveyed the damage, absent mindedly moving cups, plates, papers and books from one surface to another with no real purpose. She sighed. Last night's dishes had been left, the opportunity of an early night seeming preferable, and now she was left to face them as her self imposed penance for yet again starting the day off badly and biting the head off her partner. She turned on the radio. The music made her pause as it tugged at something in the depths of her memory, but she forced herself beyond the struggle to recollect, and continued in the futile business of bringing order to the mess created by the dinner the night before. She began to hum as her consciousness finally came into line with the task being pursued, opening up a crack



of space into which grew the memory that she had been only vaguely aware of before. Without warning she was back there, a quiet and withdrawn child, alienated in the body too big for her age, with the musical trigger resonating in her head... "I'm on my way to Amarillo..."

### Kali's Notebook: 1998 - 2001.

I'm really struggling with the connection between gender and sexuality. I think I'll work on one first, get that at least sorted in my head before I try and sort the other out... but it's not working like that. How do 'female', 'woman' and 'feminine' fit in with being lesbian, straight and bisexual? And in the interconnections, where are the words to describe all the permutations? How can I understand my self if the words don't exist to let me think about myself?

Kali broke out of the initial intensity of the recollection with practised ease, thinking instead of the heat of the bubbly water she passed the dishes through, so hot it stung through the rubber of her gloves, moving on to the irritation she had felt at last night's Question Time debate about Section 28. The uninvited memory hovered, filling the intervals between thoughts with a wave-like motion, constantly reminding of its presence. However, diluted it was manageable and masochistically intriguing, so she allowed its shadow to fall, and began working with a new sense of purpose. She thought of her studies and the work she would need to do today. With the kitchen cleared she took a bag of veggie mince out of the freezer for the night's main meal, checking the fridge for salad and vegetables and the bottom freezer drawer for calorie laden éclairs and ice cream. Kali experienced the daily frustration and



pain of her intense need to control the preparation of food in the house, while simultaneously wanting to challenge gender stereotypes, dealing all the time with her own unsatisfactory body image, and frustrating food allergies.

She heard a thud from the porch. Was it going to be another card congratulating her on an achievement she knew she didn't deserve? She paused as the post clattered onto the mat.

I remember winning the church competition to design a Christmas card. I suppose I was seven, maybe less. I copied off one Nana had... but I still won... highly commended, although I didn't really know what this meant. I got a Good News of Luke soft back, with a shiny azure blue cover encased in a more modest cream paper coverlet. I always thought it was a shame to keep the cover on, but I felt obliged to. I was disappointed with the prize and scared in case they found out I had copied. I was afraid that Nana had colluded in my cheating. I tried to read the Good News as if it was one of the Reading Tree books I took home from school each night. I can't remember how far I got. In a strange way this started me off being labelled as 'good at art'. Thank god!

At last, good at something.

She recognised the brown A4 envelope as being from Joy, one of the people who had been working with her on her project and after briefly scanning the other envelopes for evidence of them being more urgent, Kali took the weighty package and her cup of tea into the dining room overlooking the garden. The package contained a word processed letter,



hand signed as usual, and the set of primitive style paintings, copied and printed off a scanner, which Kali had sent to her six weeks previously. They weren't brilliant quality prints *or* paintings for that matter, Kali knew, but she knew the project had been interesting and challenging at times, and it still retained an interest for Joy, who had become involved two years earlier. Participation had afforded the opportunity for reflection for everyone involved, which had been valuable in many ways for Kali, who was keen that she should not be the only one benefiting from the process.

Will I ever get this thing? People say 'of course you will, your tutors wouldn't put you forward if they didn't think you were good enough.' But I know this is crap. I went into my art A-level with the guarantee of an A grade, and came out with a defining C. My teacher thought I was the business. Trust is so fragile. One false move and months, years of hard and careful work can be destroyed. It's like balancing on a knife, between relying on yourself and relying on someone else. Over the time I've oscillated between the two, and I can't remember my reasons why.

She looked at the seven paintings, instantaneously feeling happier again with some than with others, and remembered the daily struggle of creating the huge images in the time she had allotted herself. She quickly read the letter, which explained how Joy had approached the latest developments in the project, and went on to the comments about the paintings, which although critical were constructive and intelligent. Kali's own artistic thought processes began to race and she flicked from one painting to another and back again, reading the comments offered



about them. The responses included connections with Joy's own work, and references to images by other artists which were relevant. Memories and feelings of her own were evoked which prompted Kali to quickly scribble words and names in her sketchbook next to the expressionistic self-portrait she had done the night before.

The paint is sinking into the canvas too much. At this rate I'll have gone through my whole quota of acrylic before I've even completed the second painting. And the figures aren't looking right either. Maybe I should just scrap it. It's a stupid idea anyway. No-one will go for it. I should just pack in now. I've got no-one to model for me. I wish I was more confident to ask the others, but I'm more afraid of what they'll think about what I ask them to do than I am of not quite getting it right by doing it from memory. Maybe I can exaggerate parts of the body... make the feet easier by distorting them anyway. Would people guess that it was a cop out? Why do I care? Why can't I just make a decision and be satisfied that that is okay, and then just live with it and be confident with that. I need to believe in myself.

This reflection was interrupted by the very definite sound of a pneumatic drill starting up again on the road outside, and loath to let the local council ruin yet another day of study, she quickly grabbed keys, wallet, sketchbook and Joy's package and hurried out to the bus stop, heading for the sanctuary of the university. On the bus Kali lowered her eyes to avoid the gaze of a woman who she knew would try and engage her in conversation for the duration of the journey, and headed for the



back of the bus where it was quieter. She pulled out the paintings and the comments again, flicking through them, and began to sort them; which she still liked, which she'd never been entirely satisfied with, and ones which dragged her mind back to unprocessed remembrances and left her staring blankly out of the window.

Why did I end up crying on the Quayside last night? Did I just need to? How come I kept it packed away for so long, could confidently say that I didn't cry in front of anyone. Since we've talked about it, and he knows he's got to let me cry... to never say, "ssh, stop crying, it's okay, let me make it better"... I can't stop. It's like an iceberg melting, and there's no tap. It just depends on the climate how much ice will run off as water. I knew I was still upset. It's been what... seven, eight years now, and when it hurts it could be just within this last year. Losing my Grandparents, within a month of each other... then the dog. It sounds stupid, but I wondered when death would ever end. Who would be next? Every time the phone rang... what news now? I worry that I can't heal. The scabs on my hands... arms... take months to properly go. Is this a deficiency in something? Another excuse to focus on what I eat? And does the inside respond the same as the flesh? Internal scabs refusing to form, harden and then drop off, leaving new skin behind? Will I always feel so vulnerable?

She pulled 'contradiction' and 'denial' out and put them on the top of the pile, then put 'jigsaw' and 'protection' underneath them. Their



names still made her smile wryly. She read Joy's comments about 'contradiction' first. *'I'm not so sure about the heads, I wonder whether you might ever consider making transformational heads, a bit like Bacon, so that you've got the sense of sort of emotion passing through countenance in a strange painterly way... thinking about making an idea of emotion, transform a face. Say you use her head, you could actually make a series of thoughtful countenances, and exploring ideas of gender and identity through that transformation.'* Kali thought about the potential of change and fluidity, and mapping its processes. In considering 'jigsaw' Joy had formulated a strategy which Kali might have employed to better represent the ideas. *'The flesh colours used, you could muck around with that. Get your Itten out and play with actually changing the colours of these people's faces according to the transformations in relationships between complementary colours...'* In creating the images, Kali had also been fascinated by the possibilities of subverting stereotypes with contradictions. She pulled out 'protection', keen to know what Joy had said about it. *'I would suggest you get a series of boards which are maybe a quarter or whatever size suits you of the usual size you use, isolate some elements, take one element and take it through some transition, because I mean, a metaphor is a metaphor, you don't necessarily have to make it very different each time, but what you can look at is how the metaphor appears when you change its colour or its edge or...'* The thought train this started was interrupted by the bus driver angrily sounding his horn at the taxi driver who had cut him up.

I'm so pissed off with myself. Why am I so afraid to wear what I want for her wedding? Her bloody perfection in every way,



retaining virginity as she discards used condoms on the beach after sneaking away from the party; being girly but intelligent; attractive but respectable; flirty but utterly committed to her controlling fiancé. All her paradoxes become my inadequacies, and here I am killing myself about a suit I want to wear to her wedding. Are the restrictions only in my own head? I don't need a controlling boyfriend when the voice in my head cuts me dead in the act of becoming me. I hate it and like it, alternately. But either way, I'm always living within its shadow.

She looked out of the window for a while, checking out where she was and who had entered and alighted the bus, then returned to the paintings and the comments. She mused over 'denial'. This had been a tricky one. Fundamentally it didn't work, she knew, and she knew Joy would highlight that as well. Too many awkward negative spaces to negotiate, while the portraits and the abstracted body shapes didn't gel at all. And yet... there was something compelling about it, and also instantly irritating. She turned it around, still trying to determine a top. Joy acknowledged *'the green woman almost sinks into darkness when the man is uppermost, she seems to be almost under water'* Kali looked at the pink 'man'. She considered the poetry of it, knowing that finding ways in was easy but that it lacked any pathways through. Joy suggested, *'I wonder whether it's possible to look at reflection, so a sort of dual gender reflection might be fun, and that you look at all of that metaphor.'* She followed this idea of mirroring which lead her into thoughts of merging and splitting identities, of being whole and of fending off threatened fragmentation. Her mind cast back to the intense memory evoked earlier by the music and she looked again at the



painting, ignoring for a minute the technical difficulty of the negative spaces and focusing instead on the concepts which had been discussed at previous interviews. Joy wrote, *' Obviously we've talked about actually merging identities. The only problem with identity I feel is that there is an awful lot of identities that people have, and my feeling is that, when people become ill it's because all their identities separate, so when people are healthy, the many identities are there but the glue works..'* The face of the abusive partner who had once dismantled her glued pieces entered Kali's mind, then became that of her counsellor which then evaporated into the green girl in the painting.

How can I challenge anything when all this does is re-inscribe the other thing which I'm not. When neither stereotype fits, challenging each splits you right down the middle and tears the best bits of you apart. How can I live, breathe, even just exist lying alone in bed when there is nothing for me to be. 'Being' oppresses me... not my own, whatever that is, but as a concept which we all live by. Until I can step out of it I can't even lie in bed without feeling contorted. Where is an answer?

Kali turned the painting around again. Joy said she felt the centre held. She liked that. But the periphery remained chaotic and threatening while the faces resisted integration with the centre. The sense of irritation returned. She read on... Joy suggested that she put a thumb over each face to block them out. This she said had lead to a moment of resonance with the central motif. *' Oddly enough this shape without these heads works, but then that loses the dual identity so would that mean therefore...if we actually, in a funny kind of way, if you took*



*the portraits away, what you've got in the centre is quite a sophisticated symbol, which says everything you want to say. The only problem is this bloomin little baby because you don't know which way to turn him up, so you'd have to... use maybe, that other lovely little gender symbol, the yin yang.'* In simplifying the image down to its core there was some resolution for Joy to the difficulties the painting had produced initially, and a sense of satisfaction came over Kali as she contemplated the cuts that had been made.

I walked past someone wearing CK 'Be' again today. It was okay. No nausea, panicking, or angry feelings, just a sense of how long ago that was, and how far removed from the person I was then I have become. This distance protects me now. He can't hurt me even if the square jaw the reminiscent smell was attached to was his walking past me. I'd still rather it wasn't, in case he still possessed some of the power to rapidly cut me into pieces he once had. I like to think I'm strong enough to withstand that now. But just like with some people I can go straight back to feeling about six years old and about to have the emotional shit kicked out of me, I wonder if he could translate me back to being twenty one, green and too naïve of the games adult relationships are made of.

She flicked through the other paintings more leisurely, and found she still derived a particular sense of enjoyment out of 'stability'. Going back to the comments Joy had made about the mechanics of the paintings, she wondered about the borders of the work, and the surfaces. The paintings were all oblong, flat and smooth, which



introduced very definite constraints. Joy had written about the students she taught at the local art college and privately at home, and how her personal emphasis at the moment was on abrading surfaces. Their Millennium related topic was 'time' and rather than fall into the rhetoric of getting life models to hold watches, Joy explained that she emphasised the aged nature of the images and surfaces, and the emergence and recession of objects. She believed that Kali's work would benefit from exploration in these areas also as there was a definite sense of restraint. Breaking out of boundaries and borders was important, as was not being defined by rigid definitions or rules. She wrote, '*Canvasses don't all have to be square.*' Joy referenced the work of artist Clemente whose watercolours on paper were very liberated, yet still full of pattern and colour like Kali's, '*these are quite interesting, heads touching, more or less kissing, and there is a lovely sense of pattern, but very free, but then you get that from looking at the materials that you use, the type of paper or canvas, what you want it to do, I mean your paintings would change completely if you used an unprimed canvas and a dye, which would probably give you something more like Clemente.*' The idea of breaking out of conventions occupied Kali as she packed the paintings away and got off the bus at her stop. The university was only a short walk away, and she found herself thinking about the éclairs in the freezer and the mince defrosting on the bench, before she got out her pass card and opened the art room door.

I love the new stuff of Frida Kahlo's I found in the library yesterday. I study her portraits and try and work out where she is, in relation to where I am. Did she ever know one place which felt okay, or did she paint so many portraits because she was



desperately trying to find the one location which would fit unequivocally? I'm still struggling through 'Metamorphosis'. The image of the bug sickens me. Is this what changing is about, or just the way other people react to it?

The space wasn't how she had remembered leaving it the week before. This always happened. Her mind would keep on working and constructing long after she returned home, and her impression of what had been achieved would always far outweigh the physical products she found on her return. This was always a set back, and required a re-creation of the space at the beginning of each new session before work in earnest could begin. Kali put her bag down and roughly rinsed a cup left half full of unwanted coffee, plugging the battered kettle in at the same time. She looked around. Canvasses lined the walls and adorned easels, while in *her* one corner of the room reclaimed nik naks boasted like a treasure trove, the centrepiece of which was a strange, amorphous mass of body parts, salvaged from discarded car boot Sindy dolls, and reconstructed as the basis of her latest idea. She was still pleased with it. Last Thursday had been a good day. Still, the place needed sorting so she set about re-organising the tumbled glue pots, moving other students' canvasses from her side of the room to the other, clearing a space on the floor free of torn collage fragments, and pulling up a chair next to the radiator. The room was well lit by large high windows and it was a bright day, and Kali lay out the paintings she had received back that day on the floor in the direct sunlight. She sat down satisfied.

The textile work is coming on great. I'm really into the idea of imagery only being available when the light is shone through the



fabric... then the layers of shapes will show up according to how much light they allow through them, and it will be like an image made up of infinite shades of grey. It is delicate and fragile like lace, and the hand sewing makes it very homely and amateur looking: crafty, as opposed to polished and presented 'arty'. It's funny when people walk through the art room and do a double take at me sitting on the table sewing white cotton shapes onto a white cotton circle. I think they're more used to me hammering away at bits of tin, drilling holes in them and using links of chains to join them together, like war artefacts spat out of an exploding plane. I'm finding it quite therapeutic.

Kali contemplated the images, getting up and walking around them, and thought of the map she had sent previously, navigating ways through the earlier phases of the project. She spaced the paintings out, making pathways and altering their layout to find a sense of coherence and functioning. She then properly read the comments Joy had sent in response to the art works. Joy reported seeing lots of chains of differing kinds, some of which one got locked into, while others had ways of escape, and she noticed the exciting transformations going on within images and wanted Kali to pursue this. Kali rearranged the paintings again, but she still perceived a barrier to total freedom of movement and this grated on her otherwise content mood. She got up to make her tea, easily stepping through the debris which still littered the floor, and while the water in the cup gradually darkened she surveyed the interior of the room, reflecting on its purpose in her life, and considered again the centrality of art making to her most instinctive ways of knowing. Joy's



comments had reiterated this, as she had expressed to Kali the importance in her own life of art making. She wrote, *'It wasn't until I was able to get my own studio, and I had to work to get it, that my work changed, and I could be in a big space. You can actually start to pull some of those ideas apart. I'm very much for the 'painting is philosophy' point of view, where you're dealing with a magical space, and philosophy is like a magical space of thought, and painting is close to that. Even abstract painters have that wonderful illusion of space on a flat ground, space of whatever kind, whether flat or whether it gives distance, and philosophical thought is like that too, so a metaphor within that can be so subtle.'*

Why are most magazines about weddings called 'Bride something or other'? It really pisses me off. Why is that? Last night I dreamt of a yellow house, with water colour poppies running down the walls, and two people under a patchwork quilt which was big enough to wrap around them both twice. It was so warm, and they ate cakes and drank coffee or hot chocolate topped with cream and marshmallows and a flake until they were happily full. Then the flowers on the walls slipped off and became friends and family and children and grandchildren, and all the colours intermixed until all that was left was a luminous infinite blue. That was my dream.

Kali picked up 'symbols' and sat down. Although Joy said its negative spaces didn't work particularly well, it was still very evocative for her of something which she could only barely sense, like a faint scent which pulls at a memory from long ago. Joy had written, *'...the human*



*chain in the middle, and the two chains of people either side and these look very much like the sort of dancing dollies that you cut out in playgroup, I've cut them out many times... a sort of child-like feel..'* Childlike. Childhood. What were these concepts? What understanding did she have of them in the context of her own growing up? And the chains. She recalled other participants' sentiments about spaces they dared not enter or were not allowed to leave which had been expressed at earlier interviews. The fear and confusion, abandonment when protection was needed. She looked at what Joy had written about Key to Love and understood something she had struggled with for a long time. *'They are... seem to be symbiotic, but there is estrangement too... and I don't know what the significance of the chain is, because there are links of attachment, it could be like an umbilical chord, but equally this looks like quite a heavy chain, so quite difficult to remove. In a way there seems to be a no-way-out-ness.'* Being trapped in relationships, guilt and feelings of responsibility and culpability. The recollection was powerful and she felt ashamed once again. When would she ever truly believe it wasn't her fault, Kali wondered, suddenly tearful.

Joy's response to 'Jigsaw' provided some respite from the intensity of the resonance. *'We've got chain imagery again, but there are ways out of this chain. There are little gaps, and this chain there has just become a simple piece of string, and that is quite an exciting transformation.'* Kali focused on the spiral effect for some time. She slid into thinking about her own parenting role, and how she had felt about being referred to as a step mam.

Challenging is hard. Managing the feelings is also hard. As is carrying on playing when my insides are being eaten by the most



intense anxiety. This is a feeling which pre-dates me, and which I'm just looking after for someone else. Except they didn't tell me it would be hard sometimes to carry it around. They just made me promise to take good care of it until they were ready to have it back again. I think that once this project is over I might go looking for them and say I can't mind it for them any longer. Then I will be able to play and win with a clear conscience without worrying that I am really someone else, someone who does not really deserve all the hype she is getting for being a fab person.

Kali recalled last Sunday, going to meet her brother-in-law and his daughter to go ten pin bowling, how she had felt so competitive, not to be seen as the unsporty woman, or the self sacrificing 'mam' who puts the kids first, and a sting of tension pierced her. She focused again on the chain becoming string becoming rings within 'jigsaw', and looked over at the sculpture she had been working on in the form of a chrysalis of arms, legs and blonde haired heads which numerous Sindy dolls had so far contributed to. It suddenly didn't seem so pleasing and she was drawn back into the manipulation of limbs she had begun previously, determinedly focused on the feeling which the final product had to satisfy. Kali worked intensely for an hour, twisting existing limbs and wiring in additional parts to the underlying chicken wire structure which resembled a head. She tied in strips of multicoloured carrier bags to vary the texture and to give the appearance of wrinkled skin, and scribbled thoughts and phrases into her sketch book as her mind wandered, freed from the monotony of the physical work at hand. She knelt back and appraised the progress so far, standing up and getting a 360 degree perspective on the construction. She took her sketch pad



back to the paintings and added to the notes she had been making, contemplating how to take these responses forward to further develop her project. She understood that the participants had been quite disclosing at times in the study, and she considered how to enable them to feel in control of the conclusions which were developing.

I think I can confidently approach this relationship with honesty and trust. There is something so real which grounds me, makes me real, and makes me vulnerable and safe at the same time. I think one requires the other, and you have to approach it genuinely. To be able to jointly construct something which will last, I've learnt you have to disclose stuff, and use that process of sharing to construct the person you are. Maybe this is the most comfortable construction I've been involved in. The weight is lifting and I can float. I can't remember the last time I felt as if I was floating.

Kali looked at the paintings again and wondered about them. There were so many changes she would make now. This partly came from the responses the participants had made to them, but also to the way she had moved on in the six months since she had finished them. She read Joy's comments about 'contradiction', feeling a bit inadequate as an artist. Joy's style was so different, and she guessed so too was her philosophy and commitment. She picked up 'contradiction' with its wonderful banner-like quality, being drawn particularly to the third eye and to the chalices. The symbolism was described as obvious and naïve, and Joy had suggested an approach more like her own work, which incorporated more successfully hidden metaphors and more sophisticated



imagery. *'I'm not sure what these religious references are, and this gender-ish symbol... you might find ways of making people work harder for them, you know something at one remove somehow. But on the other hand there is a lovely peacefulness about it too, and I wonder whether to... even taking pieces out of paintings, so that you have less rather than more.'* Cutting it down to its barest essentials, and not saying more than was needed, Kali thought, was obviously the key. Determining its core and simply presenting that. She put 'contradiction' to one side and next to it placed a piece which Joy had adapted herself from 'denial' to represent it in a more acceptable form. 'Joy's adapted denial' involved the painting being masked on each side to reveal only the central motif which 'worked'. She then turned to 'protection'.

The piece I'm working on at the moment was sparked off by the walk we went on last Sunday. Striding out along the beach, wrapped in fleeces, scarves, hats and gloves, and being blown along by a wind driving traitor icicles out of the totalitarian regime of the Pole. The sun was low and cool, and I turned back to look at where we had been, and to take a photograph, but he got there first. The shot however, is wonderful, I've got it pinned to the study wall to fall into when I look up from the keyboard. It shows a heap of fleeces on legs, hair blown like a corn field, released inside a wilderness which aims to neither sustain nor destroy it. It is complete freedom. And I love it. It will make a great basis for a new painting.



Joy reported having looked at the white figure and being reminded of Bonnard, while she wrote she thought the two Celtic heads were unnecessarily realistic. *'Bonnard didn't always define edges. You could think about having similar imagery, but playing around with not defining an edge, using maybe another white, so that a figure like that gets very lost.'* The woman was so stark and defined and naked and vulnerable as it was, and Joy expressed that she perhaps needed some protection, not necessarily from the floating man, but from onlookers. Not everyone needed to be able to see her, unless they knew what they were looking for. People aren't always kind, she stressed, but they're also not always very perceptive, and disguises can be easily pulled on. *'The Celtic heads maybe need to be even more... I don't know whether you'd use more metallic paint to do it... I mean eyes don't necessarily have to be blue, skin doesn't necessarily need to be pink, it could be all gold or all silver, or like Gormenghast, violet eyes, so that you use the colour itself in a mystical, magical way that might not specifically relate to reality.'* What was reality anyway? Who saw things in exactly the same way as anybody else? Kali wondered if *anyone* else saw things exactly like her.

Small portions. That's the key. Use smaller plates, and write down everything I eat. Then I won't dare have more than one slice of the remaining Christmas cake each week... Unless I just throw it away.

Prompted by Joy's comments, she looked again at the body of work as a whole. The pregnant woman... so many fetuses. Had she intended them to be living or dead? She couldn't remember. And in a way she knew it didn't matter, as it was the individual interpretation which would



define this. She averted her gaze to the 'Sindy Head' growing in the corner. She wanted to write the words that had tumbled into her sketch pad onto the naked plastic chests which protruded all over the object, but was restrained by something to do with body, feminism, self preservation and taste, and instead turned back to 'jigsaw'. She interpreted from Joy's commentary that she wasn't happy with it. *'This looks like a dead foetus in the centre and if you intend it to be shadowy, maybe you could find ways of making it even more shadowy and secret so that you might overlay glazing so there is a bit of visual work for the onlooker to do, so you can see that there's that sort of shadowy, almost like a, could be like a dead baby I suppose, but almost like those Gormenghast sets. They were done in a tank of water, so that you're almost looking through, so maybe in a sketch book or on another board, do a bit of work with glazes so that you can trick the eye.'* Again the need to be more protected and oblique was central in Joy's comments, and yet she still got a feeling that being in-your-face through challenging conventions, by abrading surfaces or transgressing the boundaries of the canvas was important and paradoxical in what she was saying. Through one painting like 'protection' she could understand both a will to conceal and internalise, and a desire to challenge and break out. She considered again scribing those words across Sindy's numerous chests.

I'm so much more confident inside my body now than I was. It's frightening when I think back to the times when I was so close to cutting it... not fatally, just to hurt it as much as it was hurting me. I don't know anyone else who has said they felt so alienated inside their own skin. It's meant to be home. It's getting more like the type of home I want it to be now. I'm building it the way I



want now, and the picture on the inside is getting closer and closer to the picture on the outside. This is good. They've always been so separate before, both dependent upon different things.

Finally all the bodies which are me will unite under one overarching shape and I'll be able to feel coherent. People could really like someone as together as that.

Kali sat on the floor straddling the emergent sculpture, surrounded by found and recycled objects collected over a period of six months. The idea had come originally from the obsession with car boot sales and hoarding things which 'might be useful one day' of her father-in-law (to be). This was two years ago now, but it had taken a while to collect artefacts, sift and examine the feelings attached to them, to formulate an idea out of sketchbook scribbles, and to sort materials which felt right for the job. She had been working on the construction for three weeks now on and off, in-between her full time work and full time study commitments, and was reasonably pleased with the progress she was making.

In the beginning I was doing this for everyone else, but I got to the point where I didn't care about them anymore, so I started doing it for me. I can honestly say I've enjoyed it. I do feel like I've achieved, and I am proud of myself, but it's also irrelevant in a way now, and that is the key. I'm ready to go on to something else, which will be for me right from the very beginning.



Kali returned to working in her sketchbook, sitting back on the chair now, knees pulled up to her chest and book resting on them. She studied the suspended head and the web of scattered paintings on the floor, and began re-shaping the features of the portrait started the previous evening. She reconsidered the metaphors she had originally begun working with, adjusting and fine tuning until the marks finally came into line again with the feeling she had been compelled to give form to. She worked studiously, page upon page, until she had satisfactorily reconfigured the concept, from the original idea and stimulus, to the arrangement and significance of features. She reflected on this reconstruction. The process of challenging one's own assumptions was painful yet priceless. The shift in understanding which took place through such processes were the culmination of months of struggling with ideas, and from the location of one's new understanding the path travelled to get there could be surveyed.

On a fresh page she wrote the date and time. Was it two in the afternoon already? And underneath she scattered the key words which Joy had shared in the transition to understanding she had experienced, matched in with some of her own: *'Alison Lambert = large representational head drawings in charcoal and collage; Ana Maria Pacheko; the solitary Gothic figure; component parts = identities glued to form a whole; introjects = each chest signifying an influence; external and internal/ seen and unseen; split personality; cosmetic appearance; Chila Kumari Burman; Bacon's emotional countenances; Merleau Ponty.'* From this new philosophical position she returned to working on the sculpture, drawn deep into its potential to capture something of the quality of the pain she had known and the way she had battled to know and understand what had happened to her. The creative process here



was partially healing, and the product therapeutic. She worked deep in concentration for a long time, moving between making and reflecting, both process driven by the anxiety she had had to resolve when the truths she had based the work on became untenable.

It feels really weird just being here. Five hours ago I was on a cliff edge with a storm heading in and two anxious cows barring my path. I hate cows, ever since being chased across a field by them when I was thirteen. Well these wouldn't get out of the way. I thought, 'I can't shoo them all the way to St. Ives.' So I descended the cliff a few feet to try and be far enough away from them to be able to pass them without frightening them into having to carry on along the path in front of me. I slipped. No mobile phone, all alone and nobody knew where I was. Thoughts of them finding the body months later went through my mind. But I scrambled back up, thankfully over-taking the cows, and carried on. The storm came in and I clung to the cliff face. I couldn't turn back. Couldn't face having to get past the cows again. So I carried on, and here I am drinking cider, mud up to my knees, and shaking. Trying not to be dramatic but thinking 'I'm still alive'.

Kali reflected. The effects which Joy's responses had elicited in her, while intended to be formal and critique driven, had had an effect beyond this. She put the head on the table, satisfied that she had achieved as much as was possible for the day, and happy that it was moving with her in the newly found direction. She tidied the largest of the junk scraps to make a suitable ending to the session, collecting the



books up and replacing them on the shelves. Then Kali pulled out others, opening them at the appropriate pages and arranging them around the paintings. These were some of the references Joy had suggested, and she was keen to absorb them into her subconscious before she left that day. *'Some of your images look sort of pre-Renaissance, sort of Byzantine and Giotto, and I think that it's possible to look at sort of pre-Renaissance art and Renaissance art with a fresh eye. You can find things. I think when you can't find things is when there's all that Radio 4 chat about art, and people are saying all sorts of poncey things about it, you can't see it anymore. But if you look freshly, if one actually looks at the shapes, and the strange little heads in Giotto's and the wonderful sort of angels' wings, then you can find a reference. With 'contradiction' there's an artist, Ana Maria Pacheko, and she's used those kind of references in her work and it works extremely well, there is a tremendous amount of Catholicism in those ones... But you might want to think of it another way. It has a banner like quality, I can almost imagine those pieces being sewn pieces, and they look rather primitive in a way and they're rather flat. A Diego Rivera, like 'Allegory of California', there's more form in the heads, but the way the two images are put together is rather similar.'*

The thrill of making connections fired Kali. This was when she was most alive, her mind free like an eagle to choose its own path, unconstrained by conventions and expectations, unhindered by physical restrictions and incapacities. Her consciousness rebounded like a pinball, every concept it hit lit another bulb and caused it to ricochet into yet another collision with a useful source. She frantically tried to keep up in note form, charting the unpredictable path and marking the connections, smiling to herself at the original way her mind was beginning to link



metaphor to form. She paused to survey the destination so far, casually glancing at her watch and making a double take when it read six thirty. Her spirits sank. There was no way she could make it back first now. He would definitely have started making the tea by the time she got there.

Kali flew around collecting the bits she had come with frantically getting ready to go home. She pulled on her fleece as she closed the art room door behind her, stuffing papers, wallet and finally keys into her already over-crowded bag. She made her way towards the bus stop, dashing as much as she could with the pain in her knee which was always worse when she had spent time on the floor. As she approached the Chinese herbalist a dilemma arose in her mind which she tussled with. She desperately needed to call in again for a further consultation, following the three week trial she had given a powder designed to ease the pain in her knee cap. The consultant had advised that the mixture could be fine tuned to meet her specific needs once its effect had been evaluated, and she knew that if she didn't call in now, her work schedule would mean postponing the appointment until next week. She really didn't feel she could wait until then.

I parcelled all her stuff up today and finally took it to the Post Office. It was only seven pounds something to go Parcel Force, and she sent me fifteen quid, so of course now I feel guilty about the odd video and book of hers that I kept. I'll probably send the rest on shortly, get rid of it all and close that particular chapter on my life. The ending that I'm still ashamed of. I cringe even now when I think at how inept I was at expressing anything about what I wanted and how I felt, and I wonder what is different in this relationship which frees me to spill everything out, share all



the feelings and still be okay with it. The others were wrong and this is right. I just wish I could have done the wrong ones a bit better than I did.

On cue a sword of pain shot from her left knee to the second toe from the right and she paused outside the shop. Her mind wrestled with the anxiety of already being late getting home to make dinner, and the prospect of living with this debilitating sensation for another five days with no relief. She hated not knowing that what was cooked would be sufficiently low calorie to continue the regime of weight loss she was intent on following, despite being smaller now than at any time she could previously remember. On the other hand she irrationally resented always doing the cooking, and that on this particular night this obsession was obstructing her meeting other needs. She felt a pang of guilt about the amount of time she had spent at the university over the past couple of weeks, but was consoled by the face of her partner who encouraged her to work and saw its benefits upon her. She thought of the mince, still sitting on the kitchen surface, and the vacuum that had lain idle from her hands under the stairs, as she put her hand on the door handle. Another twinge of conscience struck; she should have attended earlier this afternoon, then this dilemma would never have occurred. She turned and carried on towards the bus stop, not noticing the tiny clothes in Next's window tonight, annoyed with herself and all knotted inside, grumbling under her breath about her inability to get to the gym her knee being how it was, and the elusiveness of any long term relief.

On the bus Kali reflected on the day, and comments from Joy floated into her mind. It was amazing how much of each expression stuck with her as they were lengthy and complex. She thought of 'key to



love' with its sense of symbiosis and estrangement and found herself back at the herbalist's door, hand touching handle. She smiled. She thought about 'jigsaw' and wondered again about Family, thinking simultaneously of her career and studies with pride. She reflected on the image. What were those relationships anyway? Joy had written, *'It's interesting, that here we are together but isolated, because they are so closely... every part of each figure is touching another part, and you're just giving yourself little bits of get out. There is that feeling of tremendous closeness, and yet separateness, not necessarily a great unhappiness, but maybe not a great sharing.'* Kali thought about the stimulating conversations that were shared when out walking with her partner. She recalled happy times at her parents' Wales caravan, and the devastation of bereavement and separation. She recalled the familiar feeling of failure and being unable to change her self concept. Her mind and body swam with recollection and emotion. She thought again of 'key to love', this image which kept returning, laced with a different feeling each time. Joy had said, *'Yes you've split it, but I'm wondering whether you might join it too. You could look at how to transform the blue into khaki by moving the brush strokes up and down, so you're looking at ways of separating and unifying in a metaphorical way, which is not necessarily literal, which you could do with brush strokes and hints of brush strokes and seeing things through other things.'* This felt important. The chains were heavy and ways out needed to be found whether internally or externally.

Marriage was something I never contemplated as a child. I just felt that a story like that wasn't about me. I would never be Cinderella and never hoped to be. So when I was asked it seemed



to jar a bit with who I was. But then I got to thinking... I've pushed for the last few years to be able to be *anything*. Gender, sexuality, I wasn't prepared to accept any limitations or restrictions on who I was. Yet here I was restricting myself just because I never related to Cinderella. So I cut the chains. The ones which kept me safe in cool, radical opposition, and thought the unthinkable. And I wasn't struck by lightning, or branded permanently on the forehead.

She reflected again upon family, calling 'symbols' to mind with its family elders and overtones of childhood. Joy had written, *'The family members are sort of merging into one another, head on, head on, and they don't look... although it is head on, they don't look necessarily confrontational, but more in a sort of way, isolated. I don't know, but you could somehow merge the heads. Play around with ideas and be prepared to do some rubbish ones before you find something you like.'* Inside Kali grew a warm glow as she recalled the intense sketchbook work done today. She thought of what she could do at home to develop the ideas between now and her next visit to the university, and how to encourage herself to challenge her own fixed ideas. As the bus neared home, Kali was unable to shift her consciousness away from the two figures in the foreground of 'contradiction'. The woman was so peaceful but Joy had considered the relationship between them to be problematic. She hadn't really thought about it before. *'I mean, he's so grumpy isn't he? Maybe he's best on his own. I know you want to convey this dual identity, but I think that there is... you've got more metaphor to stretch. I mean, does she need him? Maybe she might just have that... her own personal space.'* She thought of cutting out the portraits, and assembling them in a



series, reconstructing their relationships, and thought of the ongoing work of developing and maintaining satisfying and fulfilling relationships.

My life seems transformed from what it was when I first started.

I seem transformed. My notebooks chart the changes and evidence the journey, and it's mainly embarrassing when I read it back now. Pink has turned to purple, one has changed to two and a half, sixteen has shrank to ten. The ferule cat has metamorphosed into a lion, and the overgrown, untended allotment has been nurtured into a vegetable patch, a flower bed and a herb garden. Everything around me seems different, and I realise that as I look in new ways, what I perceive reflects back and changes me as much as I change it by seeing it.

Walking down the cut to her house, nestled in the quiet leafy street she again thought about the image of 'stability' focusing on the legs as the real draw into it. Joy had written, *'I like the way the arms seem to be embracing, but in another strange kind of way are cutting off, and it almost has a feeling of crucifixion about it, but not quite. It's more... a cutting off, and although these people are looking out and looking away, they're not looking toward and embracing, and I find that very interesting.'* Kali thought of the healing which had accompanied the completion of that image, and what had been possible since. She reached the door and rolled her hand around every corner of her bag before the keys fell into it. She was welcomed by the smell of cooking.

The pencil drawing of Granddad now hangs on my study wall, next to the painting of me and dad, and above the vibrant photo of



mum sitting beneath the Majorcan mountains... Last night I dreamt he came back to me. He was sitting in a chair, his back to me, and I approached from behind his right shoulder, and knelt to achieve the same eye level. He turned his head to look at me, and looking right into my eyes he smiled. I knew he still recognised me.

Then he stretched out his big hands to embrace me, and I knew that everything was still the same. I'm not religious or superstitious, but the way things are so awful at the moment, I took comfort from the thought that he had chosen this time especially to return to me, to remind me he is there, and to help me carry some of the crap I'm dragging around after me. I gave in to the romantic, needy side of me and believed this.

Kali lay in bed that night while two images, 'stability' and 'denial', dominated her mind and defined her feeling. Of the first Joy had commented, *'I wouldn't change this painting. I think the composition is good, very interesting to see, and there is less obvious symbolism in it, and I think for the stage at which it was painted, that stays and that's fine.'* Of the other she reported feeling ambivalent. *'The representational nature of those two heads in those particular colours stops us from seeing that piece of rather sophisticated idea. But it's fascinating really because although it's a difficult one it's actually holding together elements of a future painting where you will have sorted out all those problems for yourself.'* At this point Kali wondered what else she could sort out in future paintings, or whether indeed more paintings were the way forward.



That angry, frustrated, fearful child used to bite into my arm as hard as she dared. Which probably wasn't very hard, because she never left a bruise, and I don't really remember it hurting. She hated me so much; my size, my shape, my face, my hair, but most of all who I was. I wasn't what she wanted at all. She wanted me to be Katherine Barlow, her beautiful class mate who was so popular and so cool. But I wasn't, I was me, and it wasn't good enough, so she bit me. She stopped biting after a bit because it didn't change anything and I didn't go away. Later on she threatened to cut me with a kitchen knife, but it was always just a threat. As if knowing that she *could* do it was sufficient. I think she knew that if she did it once she would never stop, and she was always afraid of getting caught. I tried all ways of making her like me but nothing worked. Then one day something changed. I stopped trying to be Katherine Barlow, or whoever the latest one was to be held up as the epitome of popularity and cool, and just resigned myself to being me. Very slowly, she stopped threatening me, although she still bit me every now and again when I made her particularly unhappy. As time passed we got on a bit better, then even better, and better again. I started to feel that she liked me a bit, and I started to feel a whole lot better. Then one day she was gone, but it was strange because initially I didn't miss her. I realised she had been drifting away for a while, but because the trouble had stopped I barely noticed and just enjoyed the peace. When she disappeared for good I could not tell the police for sure whether she had only been missing a



day, or longer. They said it was nothing to worry about. The next time I saw her she was transformed. She was pink and purple and silver and glittery, and was wearing a pair of those wings that fit onto each arm with elastic. She said 'I'm back for good' and moved in straight away.

Now I live a better life, with a friend who loves me for reasons I understand,  
and the little girl I used to be  
who secretly bit  
and longed to cut,  
lives with us, quietly and contentedly.

Amber sat back and surveyed what she had written. It was a good morning's work, and she could see how it might be useful to her later when she sat in front of the computer again, and attempted to stitch together the pieces of her thesis. She thought about her role in the study, what she had shared and what had been withheld, and she perceived the distance she now had on the material she had started with in the very beginning. This was now quite comfortable and unthreatening, and she re-considered her perspective on passing and coming out. She felt it would be okay for other people to have access to this story, and she found this control and confidence empowering.

She gathered her belongings together, feeling it was such a shame to have to leave the warm lily-scented room, but knowing that her thesis would not write itself despite the numerous opportunities she had given it to do just that. She bought a banana and a pear on the way back, and while she strode out up the increasing incline, she felt a gathering urge to publish the story she was working on. There was something about making this public that would seal the therapeutic nature of the project and externalise it properly, to open up a fresh space inside into which new and more positive experiences could fit. She walked on, determined to get the thesis written and handed in.



## Moving.

Amber was moving house today. She had struggled for as long as she could remember being conscious of it, living with other people whose views she just couldn't subscribe to. The turning point had come about four years ago, when she went through something of a metamorphosis. Or at least, that is what it looked like to those around her as she withdrew from the actively heterosexual life she had been pursuing, rejected feminine gender stereotypes and came out as a lesbian. They had thought she was just rebelling. But actually, things had been moving inside Amber long before that. The struggle had been gestating silently for years, and that just happened to be the time when it began to show outwardly.

Since then, a lengthy nurturing process had taken place whereby she had surveyed, planned, re-considered, adapted, evaluated, and gradually designed and overseen the building of the home she would today be moving into. It had taken a while to salvage and reclaim the right elements, and to find the right combination to piece them together, but gradually it had started to happen and momentum had taken over from there. She imagined, as her own personal project, it would be a work in progress well into the future, as she fine tuned it to meet her needs and lifestyle, but she was happy enough with its current progress to be moving in now. What she didn't want was something static again, with no room for growth and change. So for now the fundamentals were in; the roof, damp



proof course, central heating, polished wooden floors. The rest would come into existence with her. She had moved a couple of times since coming out, but neither of these bases had been in the right location for her, and had just left her yearning even more for when her own plot would be constructed sufficiently to inhabit.

Amber sat at the breakfast bar munching cornflakes and looked at the unappealing plate of bagels before her. Seven of her co-residents were around, either eating breakfast or meditating cross legged on the floor. They were keen to say goodbye and to offer the last pieces of wisdom she would hear from them. They were canny, but living with them had been hard at times as she had not been able to relax in their presence. It was something about ex-cult members.

Keeping those bloody pretentious names.

Being full of clichéd rhetoric.

Their twisted relationship to sex.

But everyone was recovering here, trying to escape something

limiting

damaging

and move on into a more liberated existence.

Dealing with the shit of co-residents was part of that.

In her block five were siblings from the same family who, Amber supposed, had grown up with dogmatically defined sex roles and now had difficulty relating to others in



anything other than stereotypical ways. Another was superb... Amber had been weak laughing as 'Stability' (name ascribed by cult leader well into disciples becoming 'grounded': aka Miriam) had recounted the story of how she had spent an hour a few days earlier defending her right to wear mascara to a feminist in her women's group who believed it was a sign of internalised oppression. The seventh was hard work. She had swapped her ex-cult status for a Born Again Christian identity, and spent her time going round in circles about how this was different to the wacko shit she was currently being counselled out of. So there they were, the eight of them, a drop in the ocean of the thousands who were all on the same crowded path to enlightenment, many of them living here and getting in *her* face.

The qualification for residence here required being in 'de-tox' groups, as they were called, and Amber's reluctantly chosen form of therapy had been 'creative arts'. This involved clients verbalising their own trails of consciousness about the art work which other residents had produced, in order to help both the speaker to gain self awareness, and to facilitate the artist's own self reflection. The therapists claimed this helped to rid oneself of the false consciousness fostered within through the time spent in their respective cults. Amber wasn't convinced. The blurb came straight from the brochure and smacked of a sales pitch. She thought of her parents footing the bill.

On this her last day, the theme of the work they were looking at in session was 'labels', and the focus had been the names each patient had been given by their respective guru



when they were first recruited *in*. But the circle time baton had come around too quickly to Amber, and she was caught unaware when the group facilitator called on her to respond. She stared at the group sitting on the floor in the middle, poised with pens and flip chart paper ready to scribble down the observations their colleagues would share. It was unusual today for the five siblings to be doing a collaborative piece of therapy. Usually they worked alone, except for the twins who had been members of the same cult. She took a deep breath.

Okay. Well, Key (ex of the wackiest type of religious terrorism)... I thought... in your work... the woman seems quite worried, and erm the man seems quite happy, and I noticed that he has a key hole, but the woman has no key hole, she's got a key but no key hole, and also her boundaries are thick chains, whereas the man, where the key hole is, the links are broken, and I thought that he could get out of the chains that held him, I just felt that the woman was very caught. I think he's more dominant and she's more underneath.



**And Protection** (a name derived from the same fundamentalist, pro-active cult as her brother)... I thought yours was like a man intruding through this opening, and that to me seemed like it was a womb, and it was a woman with another womb, and there was this woman protecting herself from outside with this baby... and she seemed to be pushing away through the opening and he seemed as though he was intruding through with this forked tongue. There's this like liquor, that's being dropped out, and I felt it was like raining or being cried into the outside world, cos the guy is pushing but he also seems like he's floating... but it might not have been that at all... I wasn't quite sure.

Amber hesitated as she came to the end of her stream about the twins. She had always found this style of working difficult and was still inclined to see the artist as the true source of



knowledge about what was represented, rather than validating her own interpretation. The twins finished writing on their paper, the marker pens beginning to stain their hands where they had rubbed against the shiny surface of the paper before the ink was dry.

Okay, so... **Symbol** (like the artist formerly known as Prince. Her cult's obsession was Pre-Verbal Sensing.) It made me think of those cut out people, you used to do them as a kid at school and you cut them out with scissors, do you know what I mean, you kind of do one and then you open it up and you've got a row of them. I thought of togetherness, but they're not joining hands. I've got men and women joined together. They've all got symbols, and they're all sort of linked but not linked in a way, and chains come into a lot of all your representations, and I wondered if these were like a chain too?



Again much writing by all five, taking on board her collective observation about the chain imagery. Amber let out a long sigh and immediately felt self conscious of such an outward sign of her weariness and frustration. She didn't find being honest like this too difficult, but the long winded format bored her usually nimble intellect, and left her dissatisfied with the process.

**So, Contradiction...** (hers had been a group focused on guilt, human failing and original sin) erm... I picked up on the priest and the happy man, and I thought about the woman and I felt she was quite an introverted woman, she had an all seeing eye peeking out of herself, although she was in herself but she was looking out through different means, and I perceived a baby and yin yang signs, and a hand which seemed sort of sinister, and up above... was the priest, and I thought 'mask' because his face doesn't seem like his face is proper, it's as if he's got a mask on. But it's really funny against this guy who is there with his eyes wide open saying look,



you know, this is me, I'm here and I know what it's all about, and she's very passive in a way, and that's why I linked that to the church.

Amber looked again at the final piece she had to respond to in this session. There was just her focus group to go after lunch, and then finally she would be allowed to go the Disengagement Suite and prepare to leave. She tried to concentrate.

**Jigsaw** (not a fucking clue what type of sad guru gives their disciples a name like that)... erm... interlocking pieces, perhaps representing togetherness, maybe representing family, but separate, all in separate boxes, but they are also different and they were all happy, all sort of happy and quite... you know, the white daisies and... they're all interlocking as well, because there was an interlocking theme going around it as well, string or loops or paper clip type things, but they're also linked, and the arms are linking do you know what I mean? So it was all linking... and I didn't really know



what else to say... there's even a jigsaw piece in it! A piece of the puzzle.

Mmm, the links but separateness, because you're in your own little box as well.

Amber was knackered, and she still had the half hour silent meditative reflection on her own history to go yet. She got up stiffly and collected a yoga mat from the pile in the corner. They were musty and sun bleached, the original hand crafted tapestry design worn away with time and use. She was sure it was crawling with dust mites. These kind of concerns weren't conducive to intense introspection, she knew, so she tried hard to put them out of her mind as she concentrated on her breathing.

Her mind

drifted

back to...

...she couldn't locate exactly when.



...when your life doesn't fit together

then it's

quite...

Difficult.

I was a chameleon,

I would make myself available

For what they wanted.

I hid the rest:.

people don't always

*like*

to see the whole of who you are.

In

relationships

this can be very confusing,

that's why the relationship ended.



Amber thought about her comments to Key. He'd created himself a key hole but she doubted whether it was tangible yet. Hers was. She had found a way out. She focused on the previous session.

No Labels.

No Definitions.

Lesbian? Bi? Dunno.

always changing

What is a label anyway?

Some people don't feel comfortable without a label.

where they are...

what people are like...

I'm quite the opposite;

it's how you see yourself.

Other people's expectations?

not fitting in can be difficult.



Thinking about the artwork again, Amber felt angry at the futility of it. She really doubted that it had any impact on or relevance for her own psyche. These sessions were always the same. She would try really hard to tell the people something they wanted to hear, which would help, or at least get near to what they were thinking, but she doubted how often that actually happened. There were so many questions. For instance, how could she comment if she didn't know who the guys were in the work of Protection and Contradiction? And for Contradiction, today she had really wanted to ask “what does God mean to you, what does the church mean to you, what does religion mean to you anymore?”, but that type of direct questioning was discouraged. She had also wondered how Protection felt about becoming a parent, an adult capable of being responsible for a child. With fifteen minutes still to go, Amber slipped into what they called ‘Wilful Non-Co-Operation’ and rather than continuing to ponder her own navel, instead contemplated the better place she had been constructing for herself.

Lunch was fine.

The usual array of vegan dishes supplemented with fresh vegetable juices, followed by home grown and made apple and oat cakes.



Amber had done a deal swapping the last of her well hidden cigarettes for one of the new 'chunky' Kit Kats, the ones with an even more intense sugar rush, and spent the ten minutes before the start of the final focus group laying on her back in the sun high on a long awaited chocolate kick. She needed something to compensate for her flagging energy and enthusiasm and that just about did the trick. She entered the session renewed by her impending departure, and sat on the seat next to Stability, leaving the other two chairs for Denial (an ex 'Cure Society of Homosexuality' girl) and the facilitator. The session got under way, and the group began by looking at the work done last week. Both Stability and Denial had completed images in the given hour, while Amber had had to take hers away and finish it in her own time. Amber was asked to give a personal response to the others' work, and chose to take the bull by the horns.

There is a woman sitting on a chair... I thought the woman looked very stable and very sort of, you know... sort of... it was like a stabling sort of thing, erm, and I feel, these are behind me... parents, lovers. That's what I felt about that one. I haven't got a problem with that one.



Picture two... I'm not sure which way to look at this one, I've been round and round, and I saw the different symbols, of the queen and the king, or the knave and the queen, erm and they've got triangles, like eternal triangles. And I was looking at the opposite of colours, the opposite nature of the man and the woman, it's hard to do in a way, I don't, I just wouldn't know who the people are, so what it's about. After I'd looked my main overall thought was struggle... denying reality, maybe, and err this meeting of triangles here, and err I actually wanted to ask, 'how do you feel about the rights of gay parents?', and that was a question I'd like to explore... I mean is this supposed to be about you or is it supposed to be... something else, do you see what I mean?

There! She'd done it! A final challenge to the homophobes before she left. Denial. 'Denial' was bloody right but not in the way the naming guru had intended; she was the clearest case



of not being at ease with her sexuality she had met. The strict polarisation of straight and gay, the refusal to engage with her identity as bisexual, the fire and brimstone, Sodom and Gomorrah bullshit she preached now. ‘Denial’ was spot on as a handle for her.

Amber was impressed at how the facilitator handled the ensuing debate. She was leaving today and had no agenda to leave behind a load of cracked pieces for other people to have to deal with. All she had wanted to do was to feel she had challenged something she believed in, to be able to walk away with a strength and integrity which befitted the new home she had assembled for herself. Her last piece of work reinforced this, and she described it with enthusiasm and pride.

I drew a picture of a woman holding a key in one hand and a baby in the other with an open door behind her, so you could see the key hole and out through the open door,

and I wanted to have all the pictures behind her, the ones I had looked at, you know like the daisy one, the daisy flowers, I picked up something from each of them... there was the daisy pictures, which I



thought of as a happy symbol, there was the hands which, instead of having the stone and the candle had the key and the baby, erm

...and through the open door it was emm, I wanted to show it as a happy world, so she's opened a door onto a happy world, and there was children's playing fields in there, and there's birds in it and a sun,

...and now when I look at it I would alter it... I didn't have the door big enough, I need to have it more ajar so you can see more of the happy scene in the background. And all the other pictures are done in squares and I didn't like them in squares, and I decided I wanted to put it in a circle, and err a lot of the pictures have chains, boundaries, but I didn't want mine to be bounded right around, I wanted mine to have arrows, perhaps pointing and going upwards, sort of moving, not narrow.



And I put these people, the heads, watching, the two people being  
mum and dad, people that are behind you,  
...and drawing a picture with eyes open. I wanted to draw a happy  
private place, with a key and the open door... and arrows to show  
movement... direction.

“That’s what I’ve got as I leave here today and it’s what I wish for everybody else here, a way out and a way forward to something which makes you happy and is all of your own making.”

Amber made her way to the Disengagement Suite. She had never seen it before; patients only ever entered as they were leaving so it had taken on a certain mystique. She became aware of her heart starting to pound, her pace quickened and a mixture of panic and anticipation began to rise within her. She clutched the small rucksack containing her belongings and hurried on towards the heavy double doors with the intricate latch and lock. For the fifth time she touched the left leg pocket of her combats, reassuring herself that the letters from her builder were still there, guaranteeing the work that had been done and



offering the company's services in the future. Once inside the Suite, disengaging was something of an anti-climax. A quick body check to make sure she wasn't smuggling out anything for the remaining patients, a couple of forms to sign, quite a formal goodbye from her personal counsellor considering that over the past eight months he had been to the depths of her soul, and that was it. Pushed out of the door which was then quickly closed behind her. Amber smiled wryly. "Surreal".

It seemed bizarre to Amber that the rehab centre lay on a fairly well used bus route. Inside it had felt as if the rest of the world were some distant social event happening elsewhere, yet here she had just taken a dozen steps and got on a bus heading for the city centre. Two stops on and an older woman with a limping pit bull got on and sat beside her and recounted the story of how the dog's gall stones had had to be removed in a dramatic dash to save its life when it had collapsed a week past Tuesday. Amber wondered if this was real life after all. When the story was finished and an uncomfortable silence rested on them, she looked out of the window and thought about her closing remarks to Denial. She recalled some of the debates she had had with Stability and smiled.



"I know it's not a very lesbian or feminist thing to say, but... I do get on with men extremely well actually, ...and when I came out as gay I was thinking to myself, oh my god, I've got to relate to all these women in a different way.  
That was quite heavy for me..."

"I wouldn't call myself a butch person, I am in some ways I suppose, it's probably peculiar to me,  
I'm that sort of bisexual, androgynous person  
I just like to be myself..."

"I have a more androgynous perception of people...  
and my expectation of women is that they're very diverse  
they're supposed to be more emotional and men are supposed to be more practical  
but that's not been **my** experience of people..."



The bus pulled into the city bus station and Amber got off. She checked the board for her connection and bought herself a Diet Coke while she waited the ten minutes until her next bus would arrive. The caffeine rush after all but doing without for eight months was immense and she savoured it like a first hit of heroin. The distance between the moment when she first came out and now opened up before her and she surveyed how far she had come, what she had achieved and where she still needed to work and develop. She remembered her opening gambit as she had first entered re-hab: a staunch protest that nothing was wrong; that she didn't need help. She'd turned it into a poem, which she still kept a copy of.

“Indoctrinated.

I mean... my background,

confession every Saturday,

church every Sunday, and then benediction

every Sunday as well.

All through my childhood

indoctrinated.

It's taken me a long time to

overturn...

to understand.



And what does it mean to me now?

I still believe in God."

But they'd smiled, striped her of her possessions and thrown her in with everyone else on Maple wing. They didn't buy it. Clearly they had felt her claim of being 'clean' was a lie. What they hadn't realised at the time was that she *was* enlightened, but not in the ways claimed by the other, brainwashed residents. In a way *still* not understood by the 'experts' who labelled and admitted her. Amber next recalled the speech she had made just a few days ago to the Exit Team. The one that had eventually got her out, and she stared blankly at the mouth organ playing busker in the bus station as she formulated this too into verse.

"Have more belief in yourself than  
in the values you've been taught;

I'm not inferior. Transcend.

Don't place them above you,  
you be the one looking down

with them below you,

never knowing what you know  
seeing nor feeling.

Free yourself.



live your life...

I hold onto God in my own mind.

But now I

symbolise my own beliefs as

a woman.

Don't oppress yourself.

...Communion...

I don't think of it as a sin any longer.

Clean enough?

I no longer feel that limitation,

I go to pray.

...don't feel trapped by it,

I'm not frightened.

And now I choose not to confess my sins to

a man,

I'm free"



And here she was, away and heading for the home she had been building for herself. They were convinced that she was strong, independent and capable, and Amber felt stronger in her own mind than she ever had, already knowing that their truth was not her own, and that they had never really understood her because they had never got beyond their own limitations in order to be able to hear her.

When the long walk from the bus stop finally brought Amber to her new front door she felt vindicated. The building work she had been overseeing was exactly as she had intended, and perfectly met her needs as she currently experienced them. It wouldn't suit everybody, she knew, and actually some of her neighbours might be quite upset at the way in which she had arranged the internal features, should she choose to show them. It certainly didn't quietly conform. But at the same time it was so authentic and unpretentious that Amber was instantly comfortable, and she set about accommodating the few possessions she had brought with her from the past.



## The Issues.

Out of the process of writing, of working at data analysis through this creative process, and using the stories as a medium through which to consult participants, several issues emerged for consideration in terms of evaluating this project and considering areas for further investigation, and these are explored below under the following headings:

- Consulting Participants
- Writerly Texts
- Other Fictions.
- The Construction of Reality

It was at this point in the research process that I began to draw together the different strands of what I had attempted to achieve in the study, these being an exploration of methodology with the focus on quality participation, the consideration of what an anti-oppressive paradigm might look like, and the barriers to becoming a knowing and articulating subject. This process was helped by the framework for anti-exclusionary research put forward by Humphries, Mertens and Truman (2000) through which they suggest criteria by which the emancipatory and anti-discriminatory potential of social research may be considered. The four elements of this framework are:

1. “locating the ‘self’ in the research process in terms of personal, social and institutional influences on research and analysis.
2. exploring the political/ power dimensions of empowerment.
3. being explicit about the tensions that arise in research, and relating as much about how the tensions remain as about how they were resolved.
4. linking research to wider questions of social inequality/ social justice.” (2000:13).

This was fascinating as the framework was published towards the end of my study as I was writing up, thus I had struggled in parallel with the authors to define what an anti-oppressive paradigm would look like. In the following chapter I will include an analysis of the ways in which my own paradigm model linked with these criteria.



## **Consulting Participants.**

In consulting the participants about the stories, they were invited to read them and to consider what resonance if any they had with the themes presented, how they might change the stories, and what they did or did not like about them. The responses of the two participants were very different. Joy received her stories first, and while she initially indicated that she had been quite moved by them, she appeared to become increasingly disturbed as the weeks passed. She sent several correspondences, and eventually we talked on the phone. Joy's most pressing concern was the effect of the jigsawing together of pieces of fiction created by me, recent transcripts of hers, and older transcripts of hers. This mixing of quotation and fiction seemed to jar with her in terms of locating her experience in the story, and she expressed dissatisfaction with the ways in which her statements from previous interviews had been used. She reported feeling that she had been cut up and pasted back together in someone else's image, and that she was very disappointed with that. She described this as being presented like 'Frankenstein's monster', and said that on reflection she had felt increasingly hurt and abused by this.

Part of the issue here was the juxtaposing of much older material (the first interview had occurred three years earlier) with newer material, in a way which she felt did not adequately communicate the passage of time and the ways in which people will move on and develop from how they once expressed themselves. The material in question was of a very sensitive nature, and Joy indicated that she felt her trust had been abused through my 'distortion' of her data. She reported feeling anxious that she would not want to be represented in such a way, and fearful of where my control ended and hers began. This was expressed in the desire for her material, while disturbing, to be presented in a rational and coherent manner, rather than being sensationalised tabloid style. This led us into a discussion about the terms she had used to describe her experiences, which I had lifted out of the transcript and quoted in the story, and the ways in which her developing understanding had since mediated the need to express herself in that way. Joy was then invited to rewrite that particular part of the transcript to more satisfyingly convey her experience, which she did.

A further issue for Joy was in the representation of the character in her story, and the artistic practices of this character. As a professional artist and tutor, she reported not



feeling comfortable with the art making processes of the character in the story, and did not want these to be used to represent her own methods of working. She reported concerns over what other professionals who knew her would think of her and her work if they connected this story with her. This led us to discuss how the process might be moved on, and how satisfactory outcomes could be achieved for both of us. I accepted that her concerns over being misrepresented were valid, and recognised that the juxtaposing of snippets of material from different transcripts, while perhaps creating a 'good story' in and of itself was perhaps insensitive to the participant, whose reaction I had not anticipated. I felt that this led to a critical juncture in our relationship where I had to work extremely hard to reassure Joy of her rights within the process of construction of the thesis. This was resonant with the situation Rahel Wasserfall (1993) reported when differences between herself as researcher and participants became marked, and reflexivity was found to be inadequate as a means of resolving that difference. However, in this process, Joy and I did manage to negotiate a resolution to the situation, as she suggested that I devise a further six questions to illustrate how the study had moved on since the first round of interviews which was question led, and I began to consider the extent to which the stories written were *about* the participants, and thus shifted their emphasis quite dramatically.

The consideration of six new questions was interesting in terms of defining where the study concluded and where future research may develop, and these were developed and worked on as the study moved into its final stages. The question of who the stories were about emerged from interchanges with Joy about the original story and the problems it posed for her. On reflection, I came to realise that the story was not about Joy, but about my understanding of her *data*, and as such was a story about me, while the central character who I had named 'Joy' was also 'me'. This was a fundamental shift in the way I viewed the stories, as this allowed me to own the characters and their actions, and to distance the themes in the stories away from the participants as individuals, and instead to re-present the stories as objects of my understanding of the realities we had constructed in our conversations together. This still allowed the participants to come in and challenge my understanding, but it avoided the chance of them being offended by a perceived misrepresentation within a story. The stories contained my understanding of issues



discussed at interviews, not my understanding of the participants as individuals. This clarification was well received by Joy, who suggested I re-write the story from this new perspective, and agreed to look at it again once this was done. This is an example of the way my study developed along parallel lines with the framework put forward by Humphries, Mertens and Truman (2000), in terms of being explicit about the tensions which arose. This seemed important in terms of highlighting the ways in which power was negotiated between researcher and participants, in this case particularly around meaning in data analysis.

In re-writing the story I worked closely with the original as on reflection I realised it was an account of my understanding, but that I had packaged it wrongly. I thus changed the central character away from Joy and on to 'Kali'. Thus the narrative went that she had just received Joy's responses to her paintings, and the story follows Kali's day as she tries to assimilate Joy's responses. The key change in this new approach was the notebook material, as Joy had been greatly disturbed by the juxtaposing of this with newer material in the original copy. As the character in the story shifted, the notebook material shifted too, and I created diary entries from my own frame of reference to illuminate the stories *I used* to come to understand the data gathered. I tried to use this aspect of the fiction to subtly connote the issues which I felt to be key in the study, but drawing these from my own experiences I hoped, would be less threatening to the participants.

Furthermore, I applied this understanding to the other stories which I had written and made similar adjustments in order to incorporate this new understanding into the stories' structure. This involved both re-naming the stories, and also looking again at how transcript material was used, and this appeared to be effective as Antonia's responses to the stories were very positive and constructive. In terms of the ways in which she related to the stories she said,

"Both stories raise issues dealing with identity, one uses religion the other counselling. Religion and counselling could be used as mediums to explore the inner self. When discovering personal identity the journey into the inner self is frightening especially for those who have experienced abuse. On my journey I no longer need a priest or a counsellor to direct or protect me. In the past I did and so do many other people, or so it would seem, as both religion



and increasingly so counselling, have or are becoming institutionalised within society.”

This resonance with some aspects of the stories is expressed as a move beyond the content of the stories and into the personal meaning Antonia made of them. Of being involved in the process Antonia went on to say,

“Because I have been involved in this process and my life is still evolving I can see how I have changed during the process. I feel now that I trust myself more (than I did at the beginning of the process). Learning to trust yourself is a huge part of forming an identity for yourself, or at least it is/ was for me.”

Thus Antonia expressed that, while difficult, the process was positive and nurturing for herself as a participant.

This consultation process was initially very different to the one done using the paintings, and the biggest difference I believe, was that I made the mistake of presenting the stories to Joy initially as ‘about her’ as opposed to being about my understanding of the data. At the same time I made the attendant mistake of couching my understandings within a story too close to the participant’s reality, and thus my intentions for the process became obscured by Joy’s understandable unfavourable response. However, this was a timely caution for me of the danger of not fully thinking through one’s intentions and aims when using an innovative and creative medium. In contrast, Antonia found resonance with the stories, and this was perhaps because the issues, which she related to, were presented in the context of a narrative which was wildly different from her own, thus she could consider the issues in a detached way, without getting into the issue of whether she had been personally represented accurately.

In this way then, the stories came to work in a parallel way to the paintings, once I had clarified in my own mind what their purpose was. This was to extract the key issues from the larger body of data, and to represent my new understanding of them in a detached context, in order for the participants to critically re-consider them, and comment on their validity. Once in their finished format the stories stood as a record of my understanding of the material created between myself and the participants during the interviews, and both Antonia and Joy were able to respond to these in constructive and



critical ways. In response to the re-drafted version of her story, Joy expressed delight at its quality and honesty, and indicated that the use of my own metaphors to express an understanding of the data had worked much better than relying on the juxtapositioning of snippets of her own transcript.

### **Writerly texts.**

I was first introduced to the notion of readerly and writerly texts through the writing of Sumara and Luce-Kappler (1993) and followed this reading through into studies of the semiotics of drama and theatre (Kier Elam:1980), and also of visual images (Roland Barthes:1977). It was important at the time for me as I was first getting to grips with coming out and exploring this process through my art making, some of the products of which I knew I had to exhibit as part of the overall assessment of my degree. I was therefore interested in ways of getting the audience away from the idea of ‘psychoanalysing’ the artist, and instead into responding to images in terms of what resonance they held for them in relation to their own experiences. What I didn’t want was for the audience to pick over the pieces of my life in a cold detached way, but instead for them to share an understanding of the feelings I had explored, but from their own frame of reference as it related to them. This felt safer for me, but also more productive in terms of what the audience took away from their viewing experience.

In terms of working in fiction at this stage of the study, creating an open ended, ‘writerly’ text was important for several reasons. Firstly, this was commensurate with the Postmodern philosophical underpinning of the study as it presented my voice and version of the story, as only one among many possibilities, thus enfranchising other readers, and particularly the participants at the stage of consultation. This process is articulated by Johanna Oksala (1998) who argues that discursive spaces need to be created to allow previously unacknowledged perspectives to articulate identities which have otherwise been denied, and through this articulation to then transform our own articulations of ourselves. She states,

“Promoting new kinds of identities thus does not mean that we white, academic and privileged subjects think up new names for ourselves in order to be politically radical or correct... Instead, a critical interrogation of identities



means that we create space for those experiences and lives that in our culture are marginal and therefore silenced. It means that we give these individuals and groups a voice to shape their identity, and in that same movement, shape ours.” (1998:45)

Again this further advanced the anti-oppressive paradigm which had guided the decisions made in the study so far. This again runs parallel with Humphries, Mertens and Truman’s framework (2000) in terms of exploring the dimensions of empowerment and considering what was effective in terms of engaging participants in the research process. Firstly the approach sought to avoid erasure, by creating spaces within texts into which new stories could be written and identities imagined, while it allowed individual differences to be articulated rather than disappearing under a prescriptive set of interpretations. Using a writerly text, I hoped would enable the participants to construct their own meanings while reading, to articulate these, and to challenge the stories at any points where they felt they did not represent the reality which had been collaboratively constructed at interview. This was designed to share power and control between the researcher who constructed the interpretations, and the participants who defined, challenged and validated them. This process was also closely bound to the ethics of the research, whereby the quality of the participation was a key factor in the experience of the participants. Using the stories was a means of exploring the extent to which participants could become centralised within the process of meaning construction, thus defining the research. However, I believe this was only partially achieved, as I continued to struggle with the reality that there remained only one physical author of the stories, and that any changes which the participants suggested were made to a basic structure which had been created by myself.

Furthermore, I was aware that as the study reached its conclusion, the amount of material given by the participants was greatest, and thus there was the potentiality for them to feel as vulnerable about their representation in the thesis as I felt prior to exhibiting my art work, and I felt compelled to offer them some form of protection. This also seemed to fit with some of Joy’s feedback to the paintings where she indicated her desire for symbols and meanings to be more elusive, to force the audience to do more work in the process of consumption. I felt that a writerly text should provide this as, if



done properly, the text should resonate sufficiently with the participants to feel like an accurate and satisfying outcome to four years commitment to the study, but should simultaneously be oblique enough to demand a certain level of personal commitment from the wider audience during the process of reading. However, the first version of Joy's story clearly did not achieve this aim, and Joy reported feeling extremely vulnerable due to the way her material had been handled, and I had to accept that while story writing felt like an exciting methodological innovation for me, the reality was initially very different for Joy. On the other hand, Antonia did appear able to find some resonance with the stories, while feeling they were detached enough to not threaten her safety or comfort with them.

The question at this stage then for me, was whether I succeeded in creating writerly written texts, and indeed whether these were successful in enabling the participants to engage meaningfully with the conclusions presented in the process of consultation. The stories were sent to the participants and they were asked for feedback about them, in the light that they represented conclusions I was drawing about our discussions around identity and subjectivity. In terms of the stories, I again felt that the participants were able to construct their responses more dynamically and challenge where they felt issues were handled inaccurately than they had been able to with the map. Joy challenged most in terms of defining what she felt was and wasn't an acceptable use of data, and how her experiences may be better represented. In a later correspondence with me Joy wrote,

"In your original story, I felt that your character leapt too readily... Yes, I suppose I was concerned... If your character was you, did you leap without looking in your daily life? If 'you' were 'in character' would you describe this type of vulnerability? How? As for the thesis itself, I approve of what you have done, and the changes you have made. I no longer feel exposed in the way I did before."

However Antonia also, while overall being happy with the stories seemed still able to articulate personal interpretations, and again, like with the paintings, this felt like a valuable opportunity to find out more about the participants' perspectives, rather than a situation where everything had been said in the stories. However, I did question the extent to which the stories had achieved the status of writerly texts, and furthermore



whether a writerly text, by allowing the reader the space to write into the existent story, largely erased the need to challenge its very nature and quality, there being so many interpretative opportunities within it.

In response to the stories, and to her reading thesis chapters about my research processes, Antonia made several illuminating comments about her experience of working with both the paintings and the stories. She affirmed that reading the theoretical underpinning for both methods had enabled her to reflect upon her ‘difficulty’ with the paintings, and concluded that this was related to her perceptions of visual art and ‘artists’ in terms of the genre appearing quite privileged as a one way communication from artist to audience. About the process of reading, Antonia said,

“...knowing my self, “the process” of how people understand is key (to me). The work you sent illuminated your ‘process’ and I could utilise that to gain understanding of myself... It also challenged my concept of the artist, i.e. creative, privileged, temperamental, egotistical, likely to ‘cut off his ear’ if I said the wrong thing. Writing as a medium is more accessible, e.g. TV, cheaper, books, magazines. I realise now that I could ‘identify’ more easily with this medium.”

This was an important perspective on the processes and the variables which impact upon it, and added yet another dimension to the question of whether the writerliness of a text impacts upon its success as a consultation tool.

From the point of view of using stories as a tool of *dataanalysis*, the experience for me was very different than at the stage of consultation. I found that the medium of fictional writing opened up a myriad of opportunities to know, explore, feel and understand in new and exciting ways. I found it much easier as a medium to challenge assumptions, push back barriers, and present multiple possibilities than I had done in a visual medium, and from this point of view I felt a substantial degree of freedom in terms of the way I thought and created. To me, creative writing offered a plethora of possibilities in terms of the worlds I could create, and while Jo Ann Loulan (1995) argues that it is difficult to articulate realities which have not been conceptualised yet, I found that I got much nearer through writing than I ever did with painting. I wondered perhaps whether this was because I knew the rules and conventions of painting so much better,



and thus could more easily spot the limitations of the visual vocabulary that existed. However, I felt none of the restrictions I wrote about previously in terms of using artistic forms and media which were already encoded with ideology unsympathetic to the views I was trying to express. Thus as a means of knowing and understanding, I found story writing a successful tool for data analysis.

### **Other fictions.**

In this section I will draw together my cumulative understanding of the processes of making meaning, and the construction of the self as a knowing subject. This will contextualise the process of creation of meaning in the study, and the tensions which permeated this as a collaborative process. I will begin by looking at the ways in which the participants responded creatively to the stories written, and will then look at the relative roles of the author, text and artist in the creation of meaning of an art work. This will contextualise the process of meaning creation within the study, and the tensions which permeated this as a collaborative process. This will be organised under the following headings,

- Death of the Author
- The Artist
- What a Text Offers
- Role of the Audience.

A feature of working with the medium of creative writing for me, was how it resonated for readers with other texts they had read. This was akin to the participants responding as artists to the paintings, as to the stories they responded as writers in many ways. Supervisors said that reading the stories invoked many other texts and authors including Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, and Virginia Woolf, and this process of making connections drew in another set of references and meanings which amplified and extended the meanings created by the words I wrote. Griselda Pollock states

"Art works are texts and can be understood as a site of a particular organisation of socially instituted signs which produce meaning in a field



composed of other signs i.e. other texts and general cultural systems of representation." (1987:93)

This had immense potential in terms of the stories resonating for readers, and the likelihood then of personal meaning being made and learning occurring. When a text resonates for a reader, provoking connections with other texts read, the resonances with those texts co-join the present resonance to form a web of meaning which stretches beyond the text at hand, and thus learning beyond the point of entry into the text.

Joy in particular, in negotiating her dissatisfaction with the original version of her story, made reference to many texts as a means of conveying to me the ways in which writing might yet be used to represent my understanding of our interviews together. At the beginning of our discussions about the story, she sent me a quotation from C. S. Lewis' 'The Silver Chair' where Aslan is standing on a cliff edge behind Jill. The quotation she sent read

"Stand still. In a moment I will blow. But first, remember, remember, remember the signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning, and when you lie down at night, and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the signs. And secondly, I give you a warning. Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly: I will not often do so down in Narnia... .. The voice had been growing softer towards the end of this speech and now it faded away altogether. Jill looked behind her. To her astonishment she saw the cliff already more than a hundred yards behind her, and the lion himself a speck of bright gold on the edge of it." (p.27)

This passage was given with no explanation, but it obviously resonated with Joy in terms of making a response to me about how she was feeling. I was then left to interpret this, and to incorporate it into the body of understanding I already had, out of which I had written the story. Over the next few months, Joy suggested numerous other texts to me as she explained the ways in which she was unhappy with the story and we negotiated ways of making it more satisfactory to us both. These texts included Pat Barker's novels about the First World War, 'Cold Mountain' by Charles Frazier, Jenni Diski's 'Skating to Antarctica' which I had originally recommended to her, and 'Lolita' by Vladimir Nabokov. This means of responding with texts and quotations was again useful and



exciting, as it had been when images were used to respond to the paintings, as it brought in a range of other cultural texts which would add to the body of understanding developing between us.

### Death of the Author.

A key theory in understanding the way the texts worked as a tool for knowing and learning was Roland Barthes' 'Death of the author'. Through this theory Barthes argues that at the point of reception of a work of art, the author/ artist is effectively dead, in terms of their influence in the creation of meaning. He argues that language has been used to construct the illusion of a writer within a text and that this has often been presented as a real existence, whereas in reality language speaks only of itself. He states

“Leaving aside literature itself (such distinctions really becoming invalid), linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a ‘subject’, not a person, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together’, suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.” (1977:145)

Barthes' argument follows that the removal of the author transforms a text, by deconstructing the author as the text's history, and instead arguing that the author only comes into being in the act of writing and creation of a text, and therefore dies at the end of the process. Thus the writer does not pre-exist the text, nor does s/he live on after its completion, and thus it is the task of the reader to construct its meaning. This means that the text does not contain a pre-existent 'truth' to be deciphered by the reader, whose response can be judged in terms of how close they get to it. Instead the meaning of a text only comes into existence in the moment of the reader engaging creatively with the text. Barthes states



“ Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ - victory to the critic....

...we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”  
(1977:147/8)

This theory was particularly important when engaging the participants with the paintings, as they were keen to keep me at the centre of the meaning they made about the images, in other words to ‘discover the Author’. However, it was the interpretations they made from their own frames of reference which gave meaning to the works, reconstructed the paintings more in their own images, and added to the complexity of the narrative developing about the study as a whole. This theory was also resonant within the study in terms of the ways in which new identities were constructed and articulated, as they came into being discursively (in much the same way as the Author) through the process of interview, data analysis and consultation, and thus were not evidence of pre-existent realities which I then explored. Joshua Gamson (2000) suggests that this makes the basis of research problematic, as the focus of one’s study remains fluid and changing, thus difficult to pin down. However, this was one of the strengths of this study, as it facilitated the exploration of destabilising processes of identity deconstruction through the refusal to seek stability in limiting models of subjectivity. In terms of the stories, I felt that Antonia in particular was more willing to dispense with the myth of the Author than she had been with the paintings, and to take on that role herself through the process of reading, and this facilitated her engagement with the texts at a creative level. This then enfranchises the reader, and makes responding as a writer a wholly appropriate response as they are central to the production of meaning at the stage of reception of an art work.



## The Artist.

Barthes' argument is tempered by Sumara and Luce-Kappler who retain a role for the author/ artist in the construction of meaning of an art work. They describe reading as

“...a transaction between reader and text where the reader synthesises the possibilities offered by the text with elements of his or her own experience. Thus, the reader ‘writes’ while he or she reads (Appleyard, 1990; Iser:1978; Rabinowitz:1987; Rosenblatt:1978) This view of reading helps us to understand that meaning is not found in the reader, text, or author, but rather in the interactive processes between these.” (1993:387/8)

This debate over the respective roles of artist, text and audience in the construction of meaning of an art work was particularly relevant in relation to the stories. According to Barthes, the Artist/ Author had traditionally been seen as the root of a text and its meaning, while reading/ criticism has aimed to ‘discover’ the true meaning of the text, and therefore to discover the Author. As explored in Chapter 7, via the same discourse, the Artist/ Author has been constructed as a Genius capable of transcending corporeality, while this concept has explicitly excluded those historically deemed incapable of escaping their physical embodiment, such as women, Black people, disabled people etc... However, while a postmodern ideology potentially gives artists their choices back about how best to express their reality, the cost is the reduction in the status of the artist as creator of the text. For those whose social positioning has excluded them under a Modern aesthetic, the prospect of being heard but not seen may not be appealing, while the privileging of the interaction between text and reader may be felt to further erase the artist who hitherto has never been accorded social visibility as an articulating subject. Thus a theory which retains some role and presence for the Author in the process of meaning construction, perhaps seems more acceptable.

The central question for me then is what the ‘death of the author’ theory *means*, particularly in relation to my study and the use of art making and creative writing. In terms of myself as a writer (of short stories and a long thesis) and an artist, the implications appeared positive. In terms of the short stories, the fiction represented my understanding of the issues discussed with the participants, and I was satisfied with the



way I had achieved this. I felt my understanding was adequately represented. When the participants responded, they appeared to do so without using the stories to locate the Author and to discover the truth about 'me', as they had been tempted to do with the paintings. However, the problem may come, if as Moe Meyer (1994) suggests, radically oppositional texts become re-appropriated back into the mainstream and lose their subversive potential. At this point the Author and her/ his intentions disappear, but perhaps this is as much to do with the text and its creation, than with the process of reception. As I examined in Chapter 7, existent visual or linguistic codes embody ideology which may be in opposition to the views of the author, and these must be negotiated in the process of making, in an attempt to disrupt the dominant signifying codes and present an alternative reality. The success of the artist in achieving this and creating a text which interferes with dominant signifying practices may then also have an impact at the stage of reception, whereby meanings may be more determined. This might be described again as whether the text 'works' or not. This too links to the notion of readerly and writerly texts, as there may be equally valid reasons for creating a readerly text, where meanings are largely contained and defined within the text, as for creating a writerly text which enfranchises the readers.

My understanding then, from working as an artist and a writer, was that for my purposes, of engaging the participants through the media of paintings and short stories, the absence of the Artist/ Author was desirable, as it was the participants' responses to the issues presented which I wanted to gather. This was closely tied to working within an anti-oppressive paradigm whereby meanings were not externally imposed on participants but were open to negotiation and change. Understanding my role as Author as only coming into being during the act of writing felt acceptable, because I believed in my own subjectivity outside this role, and the validity of my own role as a reader. This construction of the author in the process of writing mirrored my understanding of the ways in which the data for the study was constructed: through the interactions between the researcher and the participants. From this perspective, the researcher and participants existed only in the process of the construction of the study. Once it was completed, all parties belonged among other members of the audience of readers. To me this had a levelling effect on the research relationships.



In addition to this, I felt that I was changed by the process of writing as I learnt a great deal about the participants' data, and thus my temporary existence as the Author impacted upon my existence outside that role. Working within an art form allowed the quality of particular ideas and concepts to be explored, and this then lead on to my greater understanding of what that concept *meant* in the lives of the participants. For instance, it was clear from one of the interviews that one of the participants struggled with her role within the family, but it was only by exploring that through the medium of story that I began to understand what it meant to struggle in this way, as an intelligent woman defined by gender and other stereotypes. John Spindler explains the reasons why fictional writing developed as a central aspect of his research. He says

"It was through fictional writing that I first became alerted to the importance of feeling as an aspect of the students' understanding of their course and of teaching, and it is fictional writing that is proving the most potent means of exploring those feelings... It is one thing to know that students lack confidence, it is another to know what this amounts to." (1996:4;10)

This advanced level which moves from knowing to understanding is central to the learning which I achieved through engagement in art making, as gaining insight into the quality of feeling attached to the experiences the participants were describing added a further depth to the understandings I was developing. In addition it is clear from statements made by the participants that they were also changed by being involved in the study, and thus while the roles of researcher, writer and participant might be transitory, the effects of performing those roles are more enduring.

The problem with the 'death of the author' theory is that it is arbitrary. I perhaps fared well because I embraced it and utilised it as a central means of empowering the participants and thus achieving the levels and quality of participation which I sought. However, if one's death as an author was externally imposed, and the meanings of one's text constructed in opposition to the political values one had created it from, this might seem like quite an aggressive and disempowering style of reception of an art work. However, the degree of control which an artist has at the stage of reception is questionable anyway, as a wider audience interact with the work and draw their own conclusions. The impact of the 'death of the author' then, on the role of the creator in the



construction of meaning of their art works, is that they must work hard at the stage of creation to create a text which ‘works’ for them in the ways intended, as afterwards, at reception, the audience will only have the text to work from.

### What a text offers.

It may seem strange when considering the *meaning* of a text to question the role of that text in the construction of that meaning. It might be assumed that the text is central to the meanings made of it, and yet theorists from different perspectives have alternatively posited the author, text and audience as *most* central to the meaning of a cultural text. According to Barthes (1977), to consider what a text intrinsically offers in terms of meaning construction, one must look at its qualities as detached from the person/s who created it. One of the things lesbian and Feminist cultural critics have looked for in a text has been the subject positions it offers to the audience. A subject position is a location from where the reader can access the text. For instance, the text might actively encourage identification with a particular character or point of view, or might, intentionally or not, have spaces into which an individual identification can be made. For instance, the film *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott:1991) contained sufficient ambiguity for the relationship between the two protagonists to be interpreted as lesbian, although this is never explicitly signified in the text. Kate Linker states

“It has become axiomatic that questions of signification cannot be divided from questions of subjectivity, from the processes by which viewing subjects are *caught up in, formed by* and *construct* meanings. Central among these is the process of suturing, by which the subject is “bound in” to the representation, filling its constitutive absence or gap so as to complete the production of meaning. In this manner, the subject is the constant point of appropriation by the discourse and, in this sense, all representation can be said to entail subject positioning; the subject is at once placed in, or by, the discourse and constructed in, or by, the discourse.” (1984:392)

Lisa Henderson (1992) argues that the meaning of a text is not hermetically sealed, but is created through the interaction between text and audience, and that this allows the reader to construct meanings in opposition to dominant ideology. However, this relies on there



being sufficient interpretative space within the text for the audience to be able to actively read creatively. For example, *Thelma and Louise* could have been made more 'readerly' through the tighter definition of the women's relationship. However, it remained somewhat writerly, which allowed the audience to make an individual interpretation about the relationship

While some texts consciously open up reading positions which are empowering and in opposition to those created through dominant ideology, there is the potentiality in texts for readers to 'read against the grain' and to assume subject positions which are neither explicitly offered nor sanctioned. This illicit pleasure is explored by Sidney Matrix (1996) in relation to postcards found depicting the cover of a 1950s lesbian pulp novel intended largely for heterosexual male consumption. She argues that for the image to be pleasurable she had specific negotiations to do between her private sexual self and her public Feminist theorist self, and admits feeling a sense of guilt in the pleasure she derived from the image, in terms of its political incorrectness. Matrix reports overlooking the derogatory title, the male author, and the signals which constructed the viewing position as male and voyeuristic, and enjoyed the image in terms of her wilful misinterpretation of it, the subversion and inversion of it, and her private re-appropriation of it as a lesbian text. However, this type of subversive viewing pleasure is labelled as masochistic by some theorists (Mulvey:1975; Kaplan:1983), who argue that to gain pleasure from oppressive images, a woman must objectify herself *to* herself, as John Berger (1972) argued in his seminal text, occurs on a daily basis, and to become complicit with the mechanisms of representation which secure such objectification.

In relation to my work, I attempted to open up loosely defined subject positions within the texts I created to allow individual responses to them without readers having to take illicit, subversive pleasure and thus negotiate issues of guilt and masochism. Thus I worked towards presenting characters in ways which equalised viewing relations, and prevented any sense of objectification or exploitation. I believed the stories contained significant degrees of ambiguity which created spaces into which the readers could actively write and create. However, I was also conscious of wanting to problematise the dominant relations of reading/ viewing which privilege a particular subject position (Berger:1972), in order for the work to enfranchise a range of readers/ viewers to



experience the works in positive and challenging ways. The texts, therefore, were intended to disrupt dominant viewing positions by the deployment of visual and linguistic vocabularies to speak of the realities of lives which were hitherto largely unarticulated. It was hoped that this articulation of difference and diversity would intervene in the dominant relations of signification, and offer readers the opportunity to read from the position of their own subjectivity.

In creating such texts, the ways texts 'worked' became very important. The semiotics of theatre and drama was analysed by Keir Elam (1980), and many of his ideas can be translated to visual images and narrative writing to consider the ways in which texts communicate. Semiotics theorises the processes by which meanings are produced and exchanged in society, and is concerned with signification and communication. Elam draws on the work of Saussure who described signs as entities which link a signifier (vehicle) with a signified (concept). He goes on to argue that art works are made up of a system of signs which communicate in particular ways. In the arts in Western culture, he states, objects signified in a text are viewed more in terms of their symbolic signification, whereas in day to day life an object's utilitarian function tends to be paramount, and he calls this the 'semiotization of the object'. This semiotization then communicates in two ways. Firstly the object *denotes* the class of objects to which it belongs, thus going from the particular to the general, for instance a crow would be understood within the wider class of 'birds'. Secondly, the object takes on symbolic significance and *connotes* beyond the literal meaning of the sign, so the black crow may come to represent ill omen or death, and it is at this level of signification that signs communicate most powerfully. Elam states

"Beyond this basic denotation, the theatrical sign inevitably acquires secondary meanings for the audience, relating it to the social, moral and ideological values operative in the community of which performers and spectators are a part... As often as not, these second order and culturally determined units of meaning come to outweigh their denotative basis."  
(1980:10)



The connotative level of signs is determined by shared cultural understanding, yet this remains polysemic as the parameters defining the possible connotations of a sign are limited but not prescribed.

This was important in using art works and stories as a means of consulting participants, as I concentrated a lot on the symbolic level of signification when constructing the texts. For instance, the white figure in 'Protection' denotes a pregnant woman, while it may connote 'miscarriage' or 'abortion' through the ghostly rendering of the figure. It was responses made to the stories and paintings at this symbolic level too that were most important in terms of the developing narrative of the study, as this is the level at which the participants re-negotiated the meanings being made about the study. This level of interpretation is illustrated in the participants' responses to the paintings, as Antonia said the following about 'Jigsaw'

“this one I put erm, at the top I put jigsaw, interlocking pieces, perhaps representing togetherness, maybe representing family, but separate, all in separate boxes, but they were also different, and they were all happy, all sort of happy and quite... you know the white daisies and... they're all interlocking as well, because you had an interlocking theme going around it as well, string or loops or paper clip type things, but they're also linked, and the arms are linking do you know what I mean?”

Similarly, Joy made the following response to 'Key to Love'

“They are... seem to be symbiotic, but there is estrangement too... and I don't know what the significance of the chain is, because there are links of attachment, it could be like an umbilical cord but equally this looks like quite a heavy chain, so quite difficult to remove. In a way there seems to be a no way-out ness.”

It was at this level of *symbolic* interpretation that the participants communicated the most about their feelings and understanding, and challenged my understanding of the reality being created through the development of the study.



## The Audience.

The role of the audience in the construction of meaning of an art work is privileged by Barthes (1977), as he argues that meaning only comes into being through the interaction of the reader with the text. This reduces the status of both the Author and the critic, as it is argued that any external limitations placed on the text in terms of its interpretation are invalid. This was important in my study as it was my intention to solicit the participants' interpretations of the art work to further illuminate my understanding of the feelings about the issues developing in the study. My presence as the Author/ Artist in that process would have hindered the study, as the data I would have collected would not have been directly from the participants' frame of reference, but instead an attempt to construct an Author out of the texts. While this was something I had to work hard against with the paintings, the participants were much more willing to accept it with the stories. Thus I was keen that the spectre of the Author/ Artist did not impose limitations on the responses the participants made to the texts.

However, the participants were still not free to make *any* response to the art works, as there existed internal parameters within the texts which defined the limits of acceptable response. The parameters give responses their validity, and therefore validate the work itself, as if *any* response was valid, and any meaning was validated, the work would equally mean nothing. This is given as an example by David Best (1992) to support his argument for the rationality of feeling and the educational potential of the arts. However, while a text might set parameters, it is the reader who actively constructs meaning within this framework. For instance, in terms of 'Protection', Joy responded to the male figure positively and described a magical communication taking place, while Antonia interpreted the male figure as threatening, intruding on the internal space of the female figure. These are two different, but equally valid interpretations, which the participants could back up with reasons. However, had one of the participants interpreted the painting to be about the rail system in France, exceptional reasons would have to be given to support this claim in order for it to be seen as a valid response, as the imagery bears little relation to train travel. Therefore, Best argues that interpretative reasoning is most appropriate for responding to art works, as a range of interpretations are valid, as long as



they are rationally connected to their object. This allowed both Antonia's and Joy's perspectives to be expressed, without necessarily privileging either one, and by listening to their reasons for their interpretations, one can come to understand their world of feeling better. Furthermore, differences in response can be debated and evaluated in terms of the validity of the reasons behind them. Best says

"It is sometimes claimed that whereas there are recognised methods for resolving scientific disagreements, there are no such methods of resolving conflicts of critical opinion about a work of art, since a scientific statement, unlike a critical judgment in the arts, can be verified by empirical tests and observation... The point at issue is not whether artistic judgments are scientifically verifiable, but whether they are verifiable... there obviously are recognised methods of resolving differences of critical opinion, as anyone who engages seriously in the arts knows very well. For example, a critical opinion of a literary work may fail on the grounds either of internal inconsistency or of having less adequate support from the text than another critical opinion." (1992:34)

Therefore, by hearing different interpretations of the paintings, for instance, the participants may re-evaluate their own responses, and develop their understanding of the images, and their feelings, in new ways.

Thus while locating the source of meaning of a text with the reader, and validating a range of interpretations, the issue of the quality of the reasons given for certain interpretations may be questioned. If reasons may be given for an alternative interpretation to be made, and this is taken on board, is this a case of coming to know 'better' or coming to know 'differently', and thus are some interpretations more valid than others? Best clearly argues above that some are, based on the quality of the reasoning behind them. This is a central issue within Postmodern philosophy as its critics argue that the democratic pluralism whereby all views are validated reduces the status of philosophy, as the arbitrary levelling of all views equally erases their significance and reduces the power of criticism. However, Best's argument would challenge this, providing a model whereby challenges could be made, and competing reasons evaluated. Within the study, the participants' interpretations about the paintings and the stories were treated equally and accorded equal status. Neither view came to define the art works, instead the views were used to enable me to understand the diverse



responses to the issues which the study had been considering. Had the participants shared their views with each other, each may have come to understand the texts ‘differently’ and perhaps ‘better’, through considering them from other perspectives as well as their own. This is the potential for learning within the arts which Best (1992) puts forward.

### **The Construction of Reality, and whose story was being told?**

This section will be sub-divided under the following headings:

- Truth and validity
- Power, ownership and control.

#### **Truth and validity.**

Developing data analysis through the creation of short stories raised issues of ‘truth’ and validity in terms of the presentation of findings through a fictional medium. However, this led me to thinking about the interviews with the participants, and the data that emerged, and to consider what happened within that process, and the implications of this for the way data is viewed and presented. The study has explicitly been based within a Postmodern paradigm from the outset, while the implications of this have been examined throughout the process of the research. The understanding of reality as expressed through Poststructuralist philosophy, as created discursively in the interchanges between people is relevant here, and this is the key to my understanding of the data, and to validating the fictions which I created to represent it.

My understanding of the interviews is that they were an interchange between myself and another individual, during which we constructed a shared reality as contained in the data gathered. This was therefore not a case of me asking the participants about their perspectives on a pre-existent reality, but working collaboratively to create a shared understanding of the issues which emerged as important. Thus the notion of ‘**truth**’ was initially a complex one to negotiate within the study, but one which was resolved through an understanding of the Postmodern conception of knowledge. While myself and the participants would have already had views and opinions before the interviews, the



process of getting together and discussing and debating lead to the creation of a new, joint, shared understanding. I then took this away and tried to define what the nature of that understanding was, and then re-presented it to the participants in a new form, and invited them to comment on their perceptions of its accuracy and relevance: in effect then, its 'truth'. The stage of consultation then was extremely important in terms of confirming these 'truths' as valid, thus paintings, and then stories were tried as a means of making this aspect of participation meaningful. The purpose of consultation was also to stimulate further debate, rather than to passively confer agreement on my conclusions, and these debates lead to evaluations and changes in my conclusions, which brought them closer to the participants' 'truths' while simultaneously re-shaping those truths, as well as moving the study on into new areas.

The importance of this therefore is that the study did not seek to produce one unified story which encompassed the views of all involved, but instead engaged in individual processes of consultation whereby each participant could re-negotiate their own perspective of 'truth' in the study. This was facilitated by the use of the stories as writerly texts, as it enabled the participants to engage with the data and conclusions, and to have some degree of *resonance* with them, without having fixed meanings imposed on them. The open endedness of the texts allowed individuals to enter at a level appropriate for them, and to make a response, without feeling marginalized in the process. Thus there was space within the texts for individuals to construct their own truths in the process of reading and responding, and thus universally valid conclusions did not need to be imposed, as the power of the texts to resonate, and solicit a response which could be freely expressed was the desired alternative outcome. This was particularly important in the light of Foucault's theory of pastoral power which he argues asserts the existence of an innate internal Truth and uses this to tie the individual back to themselves thus limiting the scope of their identities (1984). It was therefore important to develop an alternative conception of 'truths' by which to consider the ways in which the stories worked, to avoid foreclosing the possibilities within the texts.

However, a further twist within this construction of the concept of truth within the study, was the use of 'fiction' to express 'truths' as I understood them. Thus I relied more on the resonance of the participants with the themes in the stories than any



recognition of facts within the narrative to define the quality of the stories' internal truths. The complex relationship between 'truth' and fictional writing is explored by Pauline Melville at the beginning of her novel *The Ventriloquist's Tale* as she writes

"My grandmother distrusts writing. She says all writing is fiction. Even writing that purports to be factual, that puts down the date of a man's birth and the date of his death, is some sort of fabrication. Do you think a man's life is slung between two dates like a hammock? Slung in the middle of history with no visible means of support? It takes more than one life to make a person.

Grandmother swears by the story of the stones in Ecuador although sometimes she might say Mexico or Venezuela for variety's sake – variety being so much more important than truth in her opinion. More reliable, she says. Truth changes. Variety remains constant. Of course, she will offer to tell you the truth if you give her enough honey, but she will never tell you how much honey is enough." (1997:2)

For me this passage symbolised the fluidity of 'truth' and the determinants its construction is based on, and gave the medium of story telling more power, as I found that writing's fluid forms were capable of capturing something of the quality of shifting realities and identities.

This had implications for the **validity** of the study then, as the process of consultation underpinned the philosophical and ethical basis of the study. The resonance the participants had with the conclusions drawn would indicate whether I had adequately understood the meanings of the reality created between us during the interviews. Thus the opportunities for the participants to challenge these conclusions was central to the validity of the study in terms of them being able to articulate differences and disagreements. Thus the importance of finding ways of consulting participants which enabled them to express alternative views is clear. This process is similar to what Patti Lather (1988) described as 'catalytic validity' whereby the research is judged by the extent to which it reorients, focuses and energises participants towards knowing their own reality and transforming it. I believe what the stories and paintings did was to give the participants the opportunity to do just that within the study. In terms of the stories then, while based in fiction, I aimed to express what I believed to be the central themes coming out of the process of construction from the previous interviews. While the issues were



presented in unfamiliar fictional contexts, I was keen to discover whether they would remain prominent and relevant for the participants, and whether the stories would resonate with the participants. In terms of using paintings and stories, Antonia said

“The stories move the paintings on by bringing up further issues and subjects for discussion. The stories like paintings provide a framework in this case the paintings came first but it could also work the other way around. Creative art is a good medium for exploring concepts, the self being an important concept.”

While Joy said

“Good insightful fiction creates a complete world, a metaphor for the real.”

This indicated to me that the participants were happy to tolerate my representation of their data within creative mediums, as they recognised that the meanings created within the interchanges at interview could still be adequately expressed within a context which might differ substantially from that it was created in. Indeed the power of the Arts is their ability to convey meaning simultaneously on multiple levels, thus giving the reader a multifaceted reading experience. The distancing of issues within the creative mediums also created critical distance for the participants, and they appeared more able to look at personal material in a detached way, and to thus take on board alternative view points.

#### Power, ownership and control.

Firstly I felt that it was important to recognise that myself as researcher, and the participants existed both within the dynamics of the study, *and* within wider structures of social stratification. Therefore a researcher might in effect interview a participant who had a significantly higher degree of social power than her/himself, but no apparent control within the study in terms of decision making. This reality was significant in terms of thinking around the dynamics of power within and across research relationships, and the ways in which being in a research situation may skew otherwise socially sanctioned power differentials. However, I was keen to balance power and control within



the study and a key element of this was the use of effective consultation as a means of facilitating quality participation in the study. Here again, elements of Humphries, Mertens and Truman's framework (2000) are apparent in my study, in terms of linking the research process to wider questions of social inequality. Therefore, in terms of whose stories were being told within the study, the role of consultation was crucial, as it mediated the researcher's influence and control at the stage of analysis, with the critical input of the participants, who offered alternative constructions of their understandings. At the same time, part of what was explored in the stories was the society within which the research was carried out, and the participants' and the researcher's experiences of that.

For myself as researcher then, it was important that I was aware of the power which the role 'researcher' carried with it, in terms of the meanings attached to the relative value of contributions to the study, and the constitution of knowledge and expertise and who has it. However, as the study progressed I became equally aware of my own **privileges** along lines of race, ability and age among others, and in addition to this I began to examine how the role of 'researcher' might add an extra layer of privilege which might mediate identifications which I had previously felt were unproblematic. Truman emphasises privilege as a core aspect of power, and thus its recognition is essential. She states,

"The problem with any of these 'locations' [within a study for a researcher] is that they are usually defined from the positions of the powerful by those who occupy less powerful positions. Thus a researcher may locate herself within the research process as black, but it is rare for someone to locate themselves within research as white, able-bodied, euro-centric heterosexual women *and then explore the implications of those aspects of identity.*"(1994:32)

While I began the study by explicitly locating myself under the marginal identity 'lesbian', I moved towards being equally explicit about those identities which secure rather than deny privilege, and one of those must be that of researcher. However, during the process of giving feedback using the paintings, I felt that the process of consultation I had developed had begun to shift this privilege, and undermine the discourse of the researcher as the locus of meaning of the research text. By the time I was working on the



stories, these ideas were more fully developed, and I pursued a narrative style which I hoped would replace the writer with the reader as the source of meaning. I found that by presenting ideas from the data within a story format, the conclusions I had drawn became more open to interpretation, which I felt passed the responsibility to the reader, to make meaning of the text. This de-centred the writer/ researcher, thus enfranchising both the participants and a wider audience.

In terms of power within the research process, Truman (1994) argues that it shifts at different times rather than being monolithically determined and fixed. This was where the anti-oppressive paradigm and the use of reflexivity facilitated in the creation of a collaborative approach which sought to empower the participants through the experience of *involvement* in the study itself. Through a commitment to working anti-oppressively and recourse to the process of reflexivity, I was able to work towards shifting power and control as the study went on, to more purposefully engage the participants in the construction of the narrative of the study, and in defining the directions in which the study would go. This linked again to the first element of the framework put forward by Humphries, Mertens and Truman (2000) which was 'locating the self in the research process'. The range of approaches used worked better for some participants than others at different times, and this was a shifting reality which allowed for a range of learning and participatory styles. A particular area of concern in terms of researcher control was that of data analysis and presentation of results, as it is often assumed as the sole responsibility of the researcher to decide what data is significant, how it is interpreted, and how it is re-presented (Reay:1996). While the participants may be consulted, the researcher also has the usually exclusive task of writing up the study, and consequently controlling what is represented and what withheld. Judith Stacey states,

"...ethnographic method appears to (and often does) place the researcher and her informants in a collaborative, reciprocal quest for understanding, but the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by informants. With very rare exceptions it is the researcher who narrates, who "authors" the ethnography. In the last instance an ethnography is a written document structured primarily by a researcher's purposes, offering a researcher's interpretations, registered in a researcher's voice."(1988:23)



In terms of my study, the increasingly collaborative methods of consultation were designed to move the study and its conclusions towards a position whereby the paramountcy of the researcher was deconstructed, and the collaborative nature of the text created made clear. The stories moved further towards doing that, as they additionally provided the inspiration for the overall structure of the presentation of the thesis, and while I was the *physical* writer of the thesis, this was again in consultation with the participants who gave their opinions on the ways their contributions were structured, organised and presented. This happened through the participants reading different chapters of the thesis as it developed, and making comments about the ways in which their material was presented within it. The rejection too of a centralised 'voice' of authority on the meanings of the research and what was discovered was again intended to undermine the expertise of the researcher/ writer, in a way which would empower both the readers and the participants. However, this particular process remained a tension until the end of the study, and still lingers as an issue requiring much more thought and investigation.

To conclude then, the 'death of the author' theory was utilised as a means of explicitly de-centring the author-ity of the researcher and exploring issues of meaning creation and expression. Fundamentally it was about exploring new ways of knowing within a research project, in terms of what could be known and by whom, how it could be known, and ways in which the knowledge could be shared. The construction of explicitly writerly texts was key in the process of re-considering the roles of the researcher, the participants and the audience, the purposes of research, the meaning of methodology and the constitution of knowledge. It also provided me with valuable insights into identity and subjectivity. It was very liberating for me to work in ways which offered opportunities for learning and constructing meaning, rather than imposing a set of conclusions as the only possible explanation of the data I had explored. This linked very closely with my own feelings about identity and subjectivity, and the ways my own understanding of self had developed throughout the study. Working in a fluid way, creating structures which allowed for multiple interpretations by the *same person* provided the first adequate framework for conceptualising my own identities which I had found. Writing stories which allowed the reader to be all and everything rather than



either/ or was a place where I finally found some personal resonance, and the unorthodox, polyphonic nature of this thesis is testimony to that.



## Chapter 10.

### What does it all mean?

In this final chapter, I will draw together, with Sam's help, some of the opportunities for learning which have come out of the study, and suggest areas for future research.

9/6/00.

Amber and I argued when she tried to end it like this. How dare she! I know she has answers for me but she just won't tell me. I call her a control freak and bitch but she doesn't change her mind. That, as far as she is concerned, is more or less her thesis written. But what about me? I didn't go through all that crap along the way for nothing. Why won't she tell me who I am? Give me a label for what I'm feeling. She says she doesn't know what I'm feeling and why don't I tell her. Doesn't she realise I've been doing that all along? Andy, I've been trying to tell you my truth, and I hoped Amber would help me.

She just said to think about what we'd written together, and to just tell you what I know.

I think that was her idea of helping.

With the publication of their book it became apparent that my exploration of the possibility of an anti-oppressive paradigm had run parallel with the work of Humphries, Mertens and Truman (2000), and it was



encouraging to find that considerations I had made during the study stood up well against the framework criteria they put forward. This is not to suggest that my study altogether fulfilled each criteria, but that I had considered each element they suggested, had tried to introduce the principles into my work, and had been involved in relevant debates. However, at the end of my study, I believe there are some gaps within the framework, and that I would like to add several sub-clauses to its four elemental parts, to expand upon what anti-exclusionary, anti-oppressive social research might look like.

As I explained in the previous chapter, the framework suggested by Humphries, Mertens, and Truman suggests the following criteria to evaluate the anti-exclusionary potential of social research:

1. "Locating the 'self' in the research process in terms of personal, social and institutional influences on research and analysis.
  2. Exploring the political/ power dimensions of empowerment.
  3. Being explicit about the tensions that arise in research, and relating as much about how the tensions remain as about how they were resolved.
  4. Linking research to wider questions of social inequality/ social justice."
- (2000:13).

In my opinion, this model fails to move very far away from methodological debates within Women's Studies, whereby the impact of the researcher on the study, and the political context of the research are key elements within a critical methodology. From the learning derived from my study I believe the model needs 'packing out' and developing to give it the radical edge of a new paradigm.

Firstly, while 'locating the self within the research process' is important in terms of making explicit the impact of the researcher on the research process, I believe it is also necessary to explicitly consider **the relationship between researcher and participants**, in terms of power, ownership and control within the study, and to then link this to 'the exploration of the political/ power dimensions of empowerment'. Thus how far the research is collaborative needs to be considered and made explicit, along with the



implications of this decision on both the study and the potential for empowerment. From my experience I have learnt that developing collaborative ways of working is extremely difficult, if the participants are truly to have shared control and ownership, and this requires a significant shift in the mentality of the researcher to give up the privilege of being in control.

Do you remember 'This is my truth tell me yours'? The Manics now seem to hate this album, saying it is the worst record they ever made. I don't know about that. I just really like the name. The more I think about it the more I understand the direction my life has taken over the last few years, so I'm taking the opportunity to tell my truth, that is, as much as I understand of it at the minute, as an invitation for you to find and tell yours.

I still find it hard to accept that my truth changes and shifts and moves. That it isn't something that you can pin down, but it's like water, changing shape depending on what container it is in. The grief I experience (and express occasionally through uncontrollable tears) is for the loss of certainty, and for the loss of recognisable markers which define who I am to other people. When I gave up the label of being gay this is what I lost with it. But it wasn't my truth so it had to go.

Furthermore, this exploration of the potential for empowerment as an outcome of the study should also include an interrogation around the *quality* of



**participation** which the participants are involved in, again linked to issues of power, ownership and control of the research. For me this was key in terms of increasing the empowering potential of involvement for the participants. This could have been further increased had the participants been involved from the very beginning in terms of designing the study and defining the research questions, and perhaps this would have lead on to the collaborative production of the thesis being more possible. Furthermore, the potential for empowerment within the study needs to be considered in terms of any outcomes of the research which go beyond the participants and impact upon an audience at a wider level. Furthermore the link between a study being anti-exclusionary/ anti-oppressive and having the potential to be empowering needs to be interrogated rather than assumed, and the connections and differences highlighted.

I've decided not to stay when the baby is born. This is hard when I know it might be my only chance at parenting. I can never really be the baby's mom or dad, but merely look on passively from the side lines. The child might love me, be used to me being around, accept my words and my rules. But would it be enough? At times I feel as if everything inside me has been scooped out and the space has been filled up with pain. I feel robbed and deceived by my body, as I now know that the cost of my individuality is a sort of infertility, and I will never hold a child of my own.

**Consultation with participants** about emerging conclusions should feature within the framework as a key area of negotiation between researcher and participants, and this would be located as a sub-clause of 'being explicit about the tensions that arise in research'. I found that the different stories which



emerge from the research form exciting data in themselves rather than posing a barrier to drawing coherent conclusions and this difference and dynamism needs to be recognised and made explicit. Furthermore, the real recognition of 'differences' and the true complexity of human life is a key feature of a paradigm which is both anti-exclusionary and anti-oppressive, and recognising the social positioning which complex intersectioning creates for individuals is essential in order for people to participate in an holistic way.

The paintings were all important to me, but probably most of all 'Stability'. 'Protection' was like my life in a nutshell, when the bits were all separate and I was too afraid to put them together. Like when I said I was straight. Then the naked figure in both 'Jigsaw' and 'Contradiction', with markings of femininity but without the physical proof of hips and breasts... I could have been looking at a reflection in a pool of water, throwing stones in to create ripples and effect a distortion. ...and 'Denial'! Just pin me to the slab and dissect me right here. If I could put a pin through the centre and have the painting continually spinning on this axis would it adequately convey the situation inside of me?

But in 'Stability' I was born. Born into the body I want, the courage I seek and the fiery resolution to face the disapproval which comes with being neither this nor that, but both and neither. Stability saved



me and I bought it off Amber and have it rolled up ready to bring back with me.

Finally I believe the role of the participants in the **generation of dissemination material** should be on the agenda for discussion and negotiation. This would mean co-authoring any published material derived from the study, deciding where and how to disseminate findings, and receiving recognition as co-researchers for their role and contribution. Thus for me the framework would look something like this:

➤ **Locating the ‘self’ in the research process in terms of personal, social and institutional influences on research and analysis.**

- *Openly negotiate the relationships between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘participants’ in terms of power, ownership and control within the study.*
- *Make explicit how collaborative the research relations will be.*

➤ **Exploring the political/ power dimensions of empowerment.**

- *Explore the quality of the contribution the participants are able to make.*
- *Consider the empowering potential for the participants.*
- *Consider the empowering potential for others beyond the research.*
- *Interrogate the links between an anti-oppressive/ anti-exclusionary paradigm and the potential for a study to be empowering.*

➤ **Being explicit about the tensions that arise in research, and relating as much about how the tensions remain as about how they were resolved.**

- *The importance of consulting participants about the emerging conclusions.*
- *The importance of acknowledging the diversity of stories about the research and being involved.*

➤ **Linking research to wider questions of social inequality/ social justice.**



- *Acknowledging the complexity of human life, and the impact upon social positioning created by socially constructed stratifying 'differences'.*

So my story is currently called Femininity. In the past it has had many other titles, each more sophisticated in representing my truth than the last. It's not a fashionable title. Feminists reject it, lesbians suspect it, men fear it, drag queens pity and scorn it. No-one likes my story, so how then can I like it, come to love and accept it, and embrace it without fear and shame?

But I have and someone helped me.

She looks like one of the women from TLC, or like Pink, Sonique or some other butch woman on MTV, feminised, but in a resisting kick-ass way. For me it works the other way, and I exist as a whole person when I can incorporate the softness of Baby Spice into the hard square body I've got. But I know what she means. Shoes are good, jewellery too. It's just something subtle, but it makes the difference between feeling like a fake, some kind of sick replica and feeling like the real thing... alive, plugged in.



If I had had another couple of years to carry on this research, the questions I now have would be...

1. How far can a study go in being collaborative between a researcher and participants, to try and erase the demarcations between these roles?
2. In what ways could an anti-oppressive paradigm be formalised and disseminated?
3. What would a co-authored thesis look like, and what would be the process of its construction?
4. To what extent can a thesis be 'writerly' and dispense with an author(s)?
5. How far can the arts be taken in terms of their utilisation within research methodology?
6. Now we know more about who we are, what more will we find out by carrying on?

Thus the six new questions Joy challenged me to come up with in the face of her dissatisfaction with the story I wrote from her data are a significant distance from the ones she questioned my asking in the first interview with her. Unsurprisingly, so are many other things about me.

My friend and I are not other types, which can be labelled and put in a hierarchy of deviance, explained by psychology and biology.

We're something else.

And this is my story about being 'something else'. Someone without a label, without words, but someone real and complex.

It has taken this study for Amber to give the label 'lesbian' back, and to replace it with 'something else', and it took my involvement in writing it to



know that 'something else' described me too. Amber didn't force this on me, either aggressively or furtively. I came to know it by myself, and I know that, in being 'something else' I am also different from Amber, despite her describing herself similarly. I have found it difficult to go through this process with her, and I have found Amber infuriating at times, being too wrapped up in herself to notice me and my changes. But at some level she was noticing, because she let my changes change her too. She took my stuff and used it, but always respected it, took care of it, and ultimately gave it me back, in a more complex form, but intact. This won't be the last title of my story. I just see it as the first one to get a bit closer.

So, Andy, as I come to the end of this letter, which in a few weeks time will be ripped up and thrown to the Gulf of Thailand, all I want to say is that, when I told you I wasn't gay, I shouldn't have stopped there. I should have also said 'I'm something else'. Then we could maybe have explored what that was, and maybe we would still be friends.

And you would still be here.



I don't know why you couldn't carry on anymore, but if it was because you couldn't stand to be 'something else', thinking you were alone in that situation, I can't keep quiet about it anymore.

It's time to come out again.

Are you left with more than just stories...? This was a question I was asked. I thought about it for a long time, worrying that what I had asked Sam to do for me in the creation of this thesis was futile.

But I don't think it is.

Because beyond stories is reading, and reading means getting involved with a text and making meaning of it. There is the potential there to know more, to know differently and to know better. To change the text and be changed by it. Writing it was important to Sam and I, and reading each others bits was equally important in what we each wrote next. Stories are what you're left with, but they're not the end, they're the beginning. A place to start the next part of the journey. A new set of questions to answer.

The closing comments then, and final thoughts about the study, the thesis and the process, have been truly co-authored with Sam.

I do like it. It is partly me, like a reflection in water... sort of recognisable but intangible and removed, with a quality which is hard to grasp. It is also her in similar but different ways, and as such it does represent our strange relationship of collaboration. We are both happy with it for different



reasons, and it stands as a conclusion... it represents something of where we both now are, glimpses at places we have been, and suggests where our futures may lie. It also says something about what it means to 'know', about how the stories we tell and those that are told about us shape our lives and others perceptions of them, and finally it is a tribute to our relationship, and what we were able to discover and create together.

We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did.



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# Appendices

## List of appendices:

**Appendix K:** questions used in interview one.

**Appendix L:** confidentiality agreement.

**Appendix W:** advert to participate.

**Appendix B:** Joy's adapted 'Denial'.

**Appendix J:** Antonia's image.



**Appendix K:** questions used in interview one.

Interview one.

Own perceptions of self. Presentation of self to others. Others perception of self. Influence of different people and contexts.

Part one.

1. can you start by telling me a bit about who you are, and what the most important aspects of your life are at the minute?
2. in what ways is your past important for who you are at the moment?
3. can you tell me about any situations where different parts of your life don't fit together very well?
4. can you tell me about any situations where you hide some parts of your life or yourself? How do you feel about doing this? How do you cope with the negative feelings?
5. what makes you decide to hide certain bits?
6. in what ways, if any, does where you are/ who you are with affect how you present yourself to others? What factors influence your choice? How do you feel about the words available to describe yourself? How do you respond if people use words you don't agree with?
7. what pressure do you feel to conform to other people's expectations? Who do you feel has expectations of you? What are they? How does this affect the ways you present yourself? When would you actively choose not to conform, to challenge peoples expectations and why?



8. can you tell me about any situations where different people have expected different things of you at the same time? How did you resolve the conflict? How would you choose to present yourself if there were no pressures on you from anywhere?

## Part Two.

9. what contact do you have, or have you had, with spaces/ events/ groups specifically for women?
10. can you now think about the issues discussed in Part One, and consider these in relation to your experience of women-only/ women-oriented spaces/ events/ groups, and tell me about any occasions when...
- a) parts of your life have not fitted together comfortably
  - b) you have hidden parts of your life or yourself
  - c) you have felt pressure to conform to other peoples expectations
  - d) you felt you were in the middle of conflicting sets of expectations.
11. are there any times when you don't experience these things? What do you think makes the difference?



**Appendix L: confidentiality agreement.**

**CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT.**

AGREEMENT BETWEEN Karen Parry and \_\_\_\_\_.

The issues of confidentiality below have been discussed and negotiated by the two people involved, and have been agreed upon as a means of protecting them and what they say during the following interviews.

It has been explained that...

- ❖ the interviews are being carried out as part of a university based project which will lead to a higher degree qualification for Karen Parry.

It has also been explained that...

- ❖ I would like to tape record the interviews, and then transcribe them, but you can ask me not to if you wish. In this case I will wish to make written notes.
- ❖ What you say during the interviews will be used in helping me to understand the issues I am researching around.
- ❖ To reach this understanding it may be necessary for me to discuss aspects of the interview with three university tutors and /or two critical friends, but you will never be personally identified during this process. You can select a pseudonym, or ask to be referred to as 'one of the participants'. You can ask for specific parts of the interview not to be discussed if you wish.
- ❖ I will not discuss the content of the interviews with anyone else. When talking to other people about the interview you should refer to me by a pseudonym or as 'someone I was talking to...'
- ❖ I will have to write a report at the end of the project which will be under examination at the university.
- ❖ In the report I will want to quote directly from what you said in the interview, but if you don't want something to be repeated, you can request for this not to happen. In the report, you can either choose a pseudonym or be referred to as 'one of the participants'.
- ❖ If you refer to specific people or places during the interview, these will be changed in the report to protect anonymity.



- ❖ You will receive a copy of the transcript of the interview. You can change any bits which you aren't happy with, and also add or take bits away, until it represents what you actually wanted to say.
- ❖ You will be asked for permission before any material from the interviews is used in any other format to be published. You can refuse to give permission for your words to be used if you wish.
- ❖ You can stop participating in the project whenever you want, and this agreement will still apply.
- ❖ You can ask for any of this agreement to be changed, or can ask for things to be added, either now or at a later date.

Signed:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix W:** advert to participate.

I am a woman researcher, artist and writer, working in the areas of identity and sexuality.

## Do you ever think about who you are?

- *Are there situations when you feel that you don't quite fit in with the other people around you?*
- *Do you hide various parts of your self at different times, depending on where you are or who you are with?*
- *Do the labels which are available to describe yourself seem inadequate?*
- *Are you aware of pressure to conform to other people's idea of who you should be?*

Are any of these feelings connected with your attraction to, or relationships with other women? If so, I would like to talk with you.

I am researching into how women's various identities affect them in different situations, and why some of us can feel unrepresented, uncomfortable, or outsiders in spaces and events organised specifically for women.

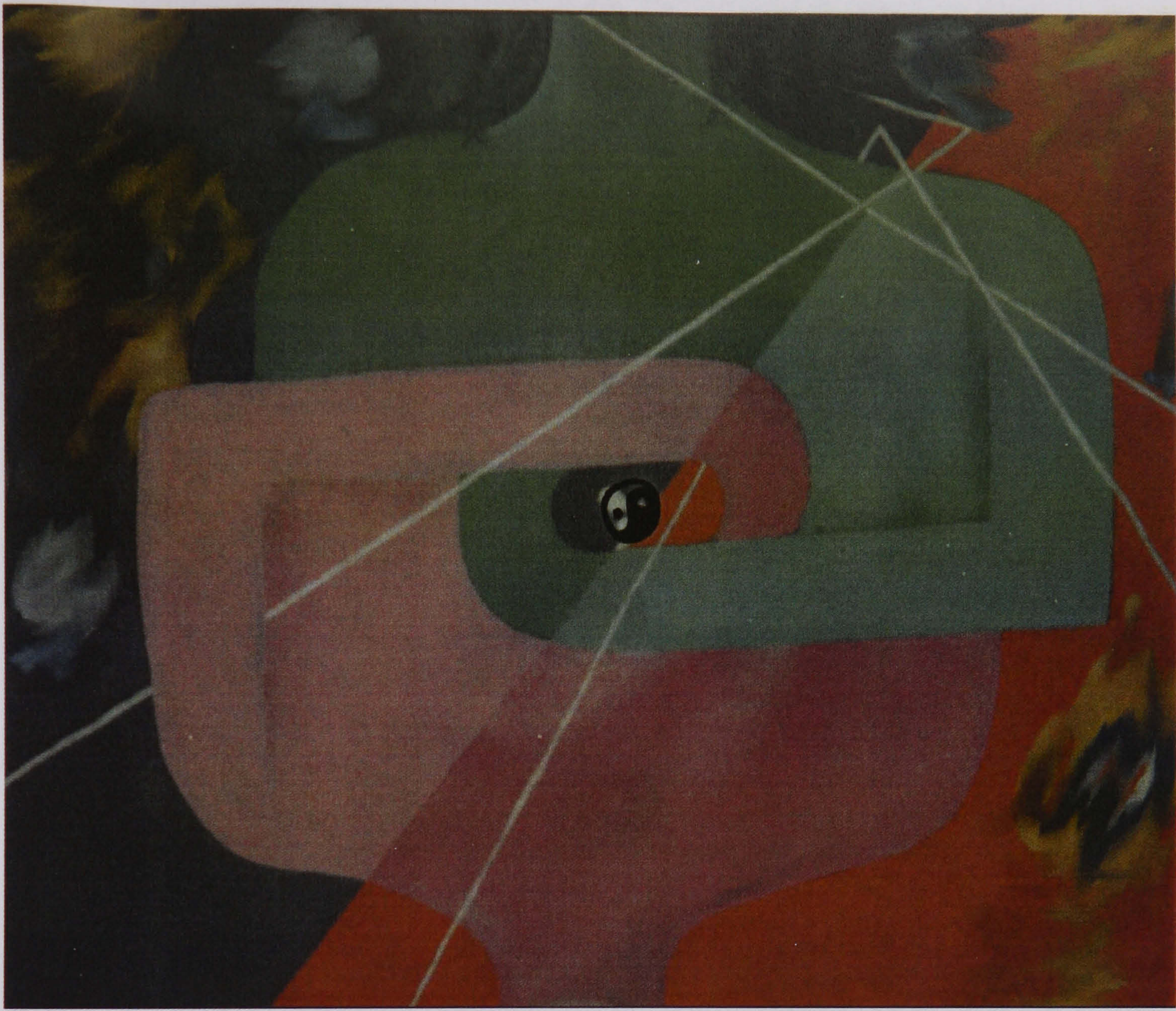
If any of this sounds familiar, and you are interested in talking about your experiences in informal interviews, write to me at the address below for more information...

**PO BOX 74, WALLSEND. NE28 7YN.**

I will aim to provide any specific facilities you may need in order to participate. Please state your requirements. Copies of this information are also available in Braille, on request from the above address.



**Appendix B:** Joy's adapted 'Denial'.





Appendix J: Antonia's image.





## Acknowledgements.

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